



Robert Wohlers <wohlersbob1@gmail.com>

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## #50\_2024\_May\_Newsletter

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**Off-Road Safety Academy** <bob.wohlers@discoveroffroading.com>  
To: wohlersbob1@gmail.com

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Thank you for signing up to receive my newsletters. I hope you've found the previous editions informative and helpful for your vehicle- supported adventures. I trust you will enjoy this month's newsletter. If you have comments, please email me: [Bob.Wohlens@discoveroffroading.com](mailto:Bob.Wohlens@discoveroffroading.com). You can access, download, and read previous newsletters on my website by clicking [HERE](#). Look through the

Newsletter Reference for a topic that may interest you, or download them all!

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## Outdoor Biz Podcast Interview



Rick Saez, originator of the award winning Outdoor Biz Podcast, interviewed me recently. It was an honor to be featured on Episode 439. Rick is an outstanding interviewer and my sincere thanks to him for asking great questions. Have a listen by clicking [HERE](#) to listen.

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## Overlanding Equipment and Vehicle Upgrades... Choose Wisely



As a full-time 4WD trainer and adventure tour guide I see practically every type of off-road vehicle and overlanding product on the market. During my courses and clinics, and when I meet individuals that read my books or attend overlanding events, I am saddened when I learn that they made an expensive vehicle or off-road product purchase from a company that:

- Has poor customer service, or
- Quit, closed their doors, and filed for bankruptcy.

It's the second bullet point I'd like to focus on in this newsletter since I'm seeing more and more companies that produce expensive products close their doors.

Take for example the recent bankruptcy of EarthCruiser USA, LLC, and the closure of XP Campers in 2019. The effects of closures like these on consumers can include:

- Warranty terminations
- Difficulty in getting proprietary part replacements
- Hard to secure product specific service for needed repairs
- Lost down-payments for pledged purchases

In some cases, the effects of a corporate closure or bankruptcy can be devastating to customers. For example, individuals have lost their entire down payment (multi-hundreds of thousands of dollars) when companies shut their doors and file for bankruptcy.

I can't speak to the reasons why these companies failed, and it would be wrong of me to make assumptions on this topic. I can, however, share with you some of the purchasing fundamentals I use to buy expensive off-road products.

The purchasing fundamentals outlined in this newsletter work for me, but they may not work for you. I am not trying to convince you that I absolutely know what I'm doing when I make a large purchase. Further, I don't use all these fundamentals in every purchase I make. I tailor and select them based on "what" I'm buying. The purchasing fundamentals listed below are in no priority order.

Perhaps there are more purchasing fundamentals than listed here. Email me if you have other thoughts on the matter – I'm genuinely interested. ([bob.wohlers@discoveroffroading.com](mailto:bob.wohlers@discoveroffroading.com)) By following these fundamentals, I've not regretted a single large purchase I've made in the last fifteen years to support my personal off-road habit or my business.

### **A Purchase Should Support and Enrich How You Off-Road**

Make sure the product you are going to purchase supports and enriches the type of off-roading you primarily wish to undertake. To do this, you need to know the five activities street-legal 4WD vehicles are primarily used for. (I define these activities in all my books.)

- Vehicle-Supported Expeditions
- Recreational (Part-Time) and Lifestyle (Full-Time) Overlanding
- Recreational Rock Crawling
- Scenic Backcountry Day Touring
- Work-Related Off-Road

Of course there are hybrid groupings of these activities, but basically you will be off-roading in one of these five ways on any given outing. The products you purchase should closely match the type of off-roading you primarily undertake. For example, and for a multitude of reasons, you probably would not purchase a mega-modified short wheelbase 4WD rock crawler style vehicle in which to overland. You could, but you'd probably be very unhappy driving hundreds of miles on the pavement with this vehicle. Another example might include putting a rooftop tent on a small 4WD vehicle towed behind your motorhome. In this example you are probably using your 4WD vehicle for Scenic Backcountry Day Touring, returning to your motorhome each evening. So, why the weight of a rooftop tent? Perhaps there are reasons, but I'm thinking the roof-top tent doesn't really support your primary form of off-roading. Argue with me if you wish, but you get my drift.

## Product Research

Before making an expensive purchase, conduct extensive research. Search the internet for competitive products and look on social media for product user groups. Specific to user groups on social media, read the comments of actual users of the product you wish to purchase. Take your time with this important step. Don't be in a hurry to make a large purchase.

For example, when I purchased my RAM Power Wagon and the Four Wheel Camper I put on this vehicle, I spent two years:

- Reading everything I could online.
- Driving all the 4WD trucks that had the trail worthy features I desired.
- Toured and closely examined every camper I could at overland events.
- Talked to sales folks at overland and adventure events.
- Made a complete list of every aftermarket accessory and modification I might need to make the purchase work best for me.

I wasn't going to spend over \$120K for my vehicle platform without absolutely knowing that this was the vehicle set up that would meet my needs.

## Visit the Manufacturing Facility

When possible, this can be an important aspect of your product research. To illustrate this purchasing fundamental, allow me to use my experience of buying my Four Wheel Camper.

(See my 2019 article in OutdoorX4 Magazine on my camper:

<https://outdoorx4.com/stories/remote-comfort-camping-backcountry/>)

It wasn't until I visited the manufacturing facilities of several off-road camper companies that I came to a clear decision on which camper company I was going to give my hard earned money to. Some of the companies I visited tried to hide certain aspects of their factory floor. Some fibbed about their production and manufacturing processes. It was easy to see what companies had their manufacturing act together, and which ones would probably be out of business in near future.

Here's an important note. There were a couple of camper designs and layouts I liked better than the Four Wheel Camper I finally purchased. However, after visiting a few of the factories of the camper designs I preferred, it was completely obvious that the campers they were building were "one-offs." This generally means that no two finished campers would be alike. In my opinion, this assembly system smacks of under-capitalization and perhaps poor acceptance by consumers. If consumers loved the product, it was offered at a fair price, and the

company had great customer service I believe the factory floor would be buzzing with activity and more than one camper would be in the assembly area. One-off campers also foretells disastrous quality assurance and repair scenarios. If I see messy or one-off assembly areas at a factory I run away fast. The Four Wheel Camper factory was the exact opposite – they had many campers on the assembly line, multiple employees doing individual jobs, plus a clean workspace. Just from looking at Four Wheel Camper’s organized factory floor it was obvious to me that this was a popular product.

For me, product design is not always as important as product ruggedness, customer service, what actual customers say about their ownership experience, and how long the company has been in business.

### **Product Supports Market Hype**

Polished marketing hype does not always denote a quality product. Look carefully beyond a company’s marketing efforts. Pull back the “curtain” and seek the truth behind the production and quality of a product. Further, I generally do not trust the word of YouTubers promoting a product unless they specifically say that THEY purchased the product rather than being given or loaned one for a length of time. Sorry, but when it comes to laying down my hard earned money on a product I always “challenge” the motives of any product spokesman.

### **Manufacturer Customer Service**

Perhaps this single purchasing fundamental is the most important – at least in my book. No product is perfect. Things break, malfunction, or problem third-party equipment can escape even the best quality assurance procedure at the end of a manufacturing process. Since this is true, especially with products being stressed off-road, a great company provides excellent customer service and warranty programs. What do actual purchasers of a product say about the manufacturer’s customer service record? In my humble opinion, customer service in America has progressively gotten worse, not better. I will not buy a product from a company with a poor or unknown customer service record.

### **Ask the Manufacturer Questions**

Don’t be hesitant to ask the manufacturer important questions. In every case, you will have to judge the honesty of their answers. These are the questions I typically ask or seek answers to:

- How long have you been in business?
- What changes have you made since you began producing this product?

- How many units will you produce this year?
- What's your production capacity?
- What warranty do you offer?

### **The Product doesn't Make Off-Road Adventures More Difficult**

Allow me to explain what I mean by this purchasing fundamental using some examples. Let's say you are thinking of purchasing an off-road trailer to enhance your camping experience and extend your load carrying capacity. First, have you ever towed a trailer on the pavement? Can your tow vehicle comfortably pull the trailer up steep mountain roads at speed? Or will your vehicle "huff and puff" at 25 mph to pull a heavy trailer uphill on the Interstate? Also, what experience do you have in towing a trailer over challenging off-road terrain? Sand? Mud? Snow? Rocks? Steep up and down hills? Narrow shelf trails? Navigating sharp switchback turns? Off-camber shelf trails?

I towed an off-road camping-style trailer for ten years. At the time, this setup worked for me. However, I rarely enjoyed the experience of towing my off-road trailer over challenging terrain. Having six wheels on the ground makes off-roading more difficult in my humble opinion. Also, the articulating vehicle-to-trailer couplers, that are a must for off-road trailers, make precise backing up on uneven terrain next to impossible in most situations. Examples of articulating couplers are Lock N Roll and Max Coupler.

Yes, after several years of personally towing a trailer off-road I got better at doing so. I also enjoyed the comforts of camping from my trailer and comfortably carrying all the off-road and camping equipment I wanted on an off-road adventure. However, on the types of trails I venture on for fun, towing a trailer off-road was difficult at times. Yes, there are many positives to using a trailer off-road. Just don't assume it's going to be all fun and games. Additional driving knowledge and skills are absolutely required.

It's also important to make sure you have the physical ability, knowledge, and skills to use the product comfortably, safely, and successfully as intended. Let's look at another situation that should be considered. Say you're purchasing a large and heavy "expedition-style" truck platform with gigantic tires and a comfortable habitation box (EarthRoamer, Unimog, modified military overlanding vehicles, etc.). This purchase demands the consideration that you can physically handle the vehicle off-road and perform important tasks like changing a flat tire on this type of vehicle. Have you ever lifted a 40+ inch spare tire? Solo, I can barely lift a 35

inch spare tire on an elevated storage perch.

### **Product Can be Modified**

This is an interesting purchasing fundamental. It's also a fundamental not often considered by some customers.

Over time, your off-road driving knowledge and skills will no doubt mature. You'll get better the more you drive different trails. You may even decide to switch from one form of off-roading (i.e. Scenic Backcountry Day Touring) to another (i.e. Overlanding or Rock Crawling). In either case the question is can your current vehicle platform or accessory equipment be modified to meet your new desires safely and comfortably? Sure, you can sell your current equipment the make new purchases, but that doesn't minimize the importance of this purchasing fundamental. This is especially true if you don't have a pile of money.

Here's another consideration regarding this purchasing fundamental. You may feel that what I'm about to say means that I have a bias toward one type of vehicle platform versus another. Not true. But like any of you, I do have an opinion regarding what works best for me. That said, regarding this purchasing fundamental – Product Can be Modified – let's examine van-style versus slide-in camper or truck topper overlanding platforms as an example.

If you purchase an overlanding van-style platform (a platform that has many wonderful attributes), you are purchasing a vehicle that is "married" to your living space (habitat box). Without tons of work, you can't generally move your habitat box pieces/parts to a newer or different vehicle should you want one. In essence, you'll have to sell the entire vehicle to obtain a newer vehicle or change to a different make and/or model. Also, should your van be in an accident (i.e. a vehicle collides with the front end of your van) you'll lose not only the use of the vehicle but your habitat box. On the other hand, folks that use slide-in campers or truck toppers can switch to a newer or different truck fairly easy. Argue with me if you wish but understand my motive. I am only outlining for you some basic considerations I use when laying down lots of money for expensive products. I do not have an unlimited bank account.

### **Distance to Manufacturer or Regional Service Center**

As I said previously, no product is perfect. Things break, malfunction, or problem third-party equipment can escape even the best quality assurance procedure at the end of a manufacturing process. This is why, if the product is expensive,

complicated, and perhaps beyond your DIY skills you need to consider how far away expert technical assistance is. You may not be close to the product's factory, but does the company have regional service centers and dealers that can fix broken components or perform warranty work? The better companies have these regional service centers. Also, does the manufacturer have a "help" phone line should you need consultation in the field?

My only motive in writing this piece is to help you. I am not here to convince you to "follow my purchasing path" or buy the products or vehicle platforms I own. I'll leave that to the YouTubers that are beholden to companies that loan or give them products. I wish you safe travels and wise purchases.

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## **Upcoming Death Valley Overland Tour - Only Two Spots Left!**





Death Valley is iconic, fabulously scenic and remote. Three days and three nights of overlanding exploring the largest National Park in the lower 48 States. Over 80-percent of this beautiful park can't be seen from the pavement – you have to venture off-road. Off-Road Safety Academy takes you to the best sights. Sand dunes, canyons, hot springs, playas, craters, mines, and high-altitude trails are all part of this adventure tour. This tour visits Saline Valley, Hunter Mountain, Hidden Valley, Tea Kettle Junction, Racetrack, and Ubehebe Crater.

This is an overlanding-style tour for 4WD vehicles only. You must be self-contained and self-reliant as we camp at a different remote location each night.

**Cost: \$650.00 per vehicle. Bring as many passengers as you have legal seat belts.**

Click [HERE](#) to learn more and sign up.

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## Off-Road Safety Academy's Upcoming 4WD Adventure Courses



The upcoming June Introduction to 4WD course is sold out, but there is a waitlist. If you wish to be on the waitlist, please send your contact information to me by email.

The June 22-23 Total Approach to Getting Unstuck course has two spots left. For details about this course and to sign up, click [HERE](#).



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