

Family-run coach businesses tend to be managed in the same way that truck businesses were maybe 30 years ago. One industry insider who switched from selling trucks to coaches some years ago remembers: "It was a real blast from the past, to be sitting in an operator's home discussing the purchase of a couple of vehicles that together were probably worth more than the house was!"

He says most coaches are not leased or acquired by other 'off the books' means: typically they are purchased as

COACH CARE

assets on hire purchase, and operators expect to get a decade or more of service out of them, often planning a mid-life repurposing that sees them cascaded down from continental tour work to local excursions and contracts, with extra seating being added. It's a great contrast to the world of trucks, where short-term use predominates over long-term ownership.

There is also in some cases an almost emotional relationship between the proprietors of a coach company and their vehicles: there is a heavy financial investment in the asset, and an expectation that it must be cared for over many years to deliver a reliable return. Furthermore, while a truck breakdown is inconvenient and expensive, a mechanical failure in a coach loaded with passengers is almost unthinkable.

Andy Warrender, currently operations manager at trade body RHA Coaches, but with over 30 years of experience in the industry, thinks there is a historic legacy of in-house maintenance in the industry that is hard to crack. "Traditionally, each coach had two



While contract repair and maintenance (R&M) is virtually a given for new vehicles in trucking, this is far from the case in the smaller and more diverse coach sector. Richard Simpson finds out why

manufacturers: one for the body and the other for the chassis. [A recent example is pictured above: a 12.8m ADL-built Plaxton Panther on a Volvo B8R chassis.] Neither was at all interested in the other's product, so by default maintenance of the vehicle fell to the operator.

"There has been a move towards integral vehicles, but much still depends on the attitude of individual franchised workshops as to how skilled and enthusiastic they are about dealing with coaches. Some will embrace them, while others see them as a distraction from the core truck business."

One manufacturer tackling this head-on is Irizar, where the UK importer

is working closely with DAF Trucks to get coach-trained technicians into its dealer network. Irizar integral coaches all feature DAF engines. Irizar (UK) director Julie Hartley says the company doesn't currently offer R&M packages, although it does operate a network of mobile service engineers to aid the majority of its customers who work on their own vehicles. Irizar (UK) also loans coaches to DAF's apprentice training facility at City of Bristol College for three months at a time.

Luke Reid, head of department for motor vehicles and DAF at the college, says that every final-year DAF apprentice now does familiarisation training on the Irizar vehicles (pictured, right). "An Irizar technician goes through the practicalities with the apprentices, and our own staff teach the theory. We started this in 2017, so the network is now saturated with technicians with coach training, but we haven't had to take people 'off the tools' from within the dealers to achieve it.

"All the qualified technicians are now on Irizar's database of technicians, so can be sent specifically to deal with coaches."

Whoever carries out the work, any

“Much still depends on the attitude of individual franchised workshops as to how skilled and enthusiastic they are about dealing with coaches”

Andy Warrender



problematic: for instance, a truck manufacturer’s roadside assistance service is unlikely to have instant access to the correct replacement mirror, should one get knocked off a coach late at night.”

Some of the larger manufacturers are working to turn the tide. Volvo Bus offers two contract levels: Gold and Blue. Within the Blue offering are two separate menus: one of which covers servicing the whole vehicle and which is offered only on those vehicles with Volvo bodywork, and the other chassis and driveline only. There’s also a Blue Classic, for vehicles that have been in service for at least 13 months. There’s also a parts-only contract for operators with large Volvo fleets and trained technicians.

The Gold offering is a full R&M service, and includes preventative maintenance. It can be extended to cover roadside repair and recovery, and extra equipment fitted to the coach, including items like AV systems and drinks machines. There’s also a seasonal

offering which is tailored to take account of the yearly peaks and troughs of coach touring work.

OTHER OFFERINGS

Daimler offers Omniplus service contracts on Mercedes-Benz and Setra vehicles at three levels, which range from routine servicing and mandatory inspections to a 24-hour breakdown and recovery service and whole-vehicle repairs. Customers benefit from predictable costs for the life of the contract, and the manufacturer says the presence of a complete service record will also aid residual values on disposal.

And it’s that last factor that may, in the end, force the change from in-house maintenance. While there is a currently a certain amount of distress selling of new-stock coaches after COVID essentially killed the coach market for the best part of two years, the vehicles are unlikely to ever be as cheap again as they are today.

Short-term vehicle prices will increase at least in line with rising component and commodity prices, while in the long term the switch away from proven and reliable diesel technology to expensive and unproven electric and hydrogen solutions will increase prices by perhaps a factor of three, plus inflation.

This will in turn drive operators away from acquiring coaches as capital assets and towards ‘off-the-books’ solutions such as contract hire. And, as sure as night follows day, manufacturer repair and maintenance is likely to be embodied in those contracts as a means of assuring residual values and (the cynical might say) keeping franchised workshops busy during the transition from diesel power.

This doesn’t mean the end of the in-house workshop just yet. The long working life of coaches will mean a legacy fleet will still be there to be cared for, and many more newer vehicles will continue in service for years after the initial R&M contracts have ended. **TE**



R&M contract will only be as good as the dealer who delivers it, Warrender points out. “It’s often specialist equipment on the vehicle: everything from air-con and wheelchair lifts to toilets that requires attention. In many cases that means calling on a specialist fitter from the company that manufactured and supplied the equipment itself.

“Even the mundane can be

