



Tractor life extension

Businesses used to disposing of units after three or four years of service have had little choice but to hang on to them until they are five, six or even seven years old or more. As a consequence, the fleets concerned have had to deal with repair and maintenance challenges that they may not have encountered before.

Perhaps they should take a leaf out of the book of no-nonsense North Yorkshire haulier Peter Metcalfe, who runs W Metcalfe & Sons. He buys new trucks and aims to keep them for 10 years: "You have to get everything you can out of them given the price," he remarks - and ensures they are maintained to a high standard throughout that time in the firm's in-house workshop.

The Appersett, Hawes-based haulage company runs 16 trucks, almost all of which are Scania. Preferring manual transmissions - an increasingly-difficult policy to maintain these days - it acquires them with a two-year, all-embracing warranty supported by either a three- or four-year driveline warranty to provide protection against major component failures.

Metcalfe follows the manufacturer's

Truck operators obliged to wait month after wearisome month for the new tractor units they have ordered have been faced with the challenge of keeping their existing vehicles running, reports Steve Banner

recommended maintenance intervals closely and makes a point of using genuine OE service kits. Doing so means that the truck maker cannot try to reject a warranty claim because a genuine component - an oil filter for example - was not fitted, he says.

The only significant departure from recommended workshop practice (and note that Metcalfe's facility is not pictured above) is to change the lubricant more frequently than the manufacturer advises. Contaminated oil can lead to premature engine wear.

Past experience means that he knows when key components are likely to give trouble, so he ensures they are swapped in good time. "We always change the clutch and the turbocharger in our Scania's at 500,000km," he says. "We know that if we don't, then the springs in the middle of the clutch will drop out

and the turbo will start to get worn.

"A turbo for a Scania costs less than £1,000, while a clutch costs £500 to £600," he adds.

This approach means that the business rarely suffers a major failure; but when it happens, it can be expensive.

"We had a camshaft go on our 18-plate DAF - a 6x2 523bhp tag-axle CF used on fridge work day and night - a while back, and the replacement cost £1,600," says Metcalfe. "The turbo was showing slight signs of wear, so we decided to change that too. The new one cost us £4,600."

Such painful experiences aside, Metcalfe's policy has allowed his trucks to clock up well in excess of a million km while remaining capable of hard graft. "In fact, I've got a five-year-old 444bhp Scania that's done 1.6 million km on round-the-clock fridge work," he says.

EXTRA TLC

A more intensive servicing regime is likely to be necessary as trucks get longer in the tooth, says Fraikin's UK operations director, Andy Towns (pictured, p16). That is particularly the case given that they may be double-shifted because a transport fleet is expanding its activities, and the new

trucks it has ordered to enable it to do so have yet to arrive. Consequently the ones it has already got end up being worked a lot harder.

A prudent approach to maintenance does not seem capable of eliminating a regular problem that Metcalfe and other hauliers experience with Euro VI trucks of whatever vintage: faults thrown up by the emissions control system. "We have constant difficulties with pumps and sensors," he reports. "It seems to be hard for manufacturers to make parts able to withstand the impact AdBlue has on them."

The marked swing away from manual boxes on new trucks means that Metcalfe, who cheerfully admits to being an old-fashioned haulier, is finally having to admit defeat, and go the automatic route instead. In doing so, he has ordered a pair of 513bhp T High auto tractor units from Renault Trucks. It is a major departure for the business, but they are £24,000 cheaper than the equivalent Scania model, says Metcalfe.

OUTSOURCING

One way for operators to protect themselves against unexpected bills as their trucks grow older is to opt for a contract maintenance deal, says DAF's UK dealer development director, John McMenamin (pictured above). All truck makers offer them.

DAF offers a variety of different arrangements, including a full repair and maintenance agreement that embraces everything from driveline and non-driveline repairs, to MOT preparation and tachograph calibration. The packages it offers can last for up to seven years, he says.

DAF has accumulated a considerable amount of data on when and under what circumstances key parts fail and what the cost is likely to be, and the rate the



Top left: Fraikin's Andy Towns. Left: DAF's John McMenamin
Above: Knowsley, Merseyside workshop at Mercedes-Benz dealer eStar

operator pays will vary significantly depending on the truck's current mileage and its duty cycle. If it is in and out of quarries all day, every day, on rough roads and in a dusty environment, then the rate it attracts will be significantly higher than it would be if it were on straightforward intercity trunking work, says McMenamin.

The price could be worth paying given the likely repair bill if a major component gives up the ghost once the warranty has expired. "If an engine fails, you could be looking at anywhere from £5,000 to £15,000," he says. A transmission going down could leave the operator contemplating an invoice of from £3,000 to as much as £10,000, he adds. Towns suggests that the bill for an engine failure could be as much as £20,000.

It should be borne in mind, however, that modern engines, gearboxes and associated components will usually keep working for at least five years/750,000km without giving any significant trouble, if serviced in line with the manufacturer's recommendations. "Reliability is far better than it was in years gone by," McMenamin observes.

Worth bearing in mind, too, is the goodwill truck makers regularly extend towards customers so far as warranties are concerned. DAF's New Generation XF, XG and XG+ models, for example, are protected by a two-year whole-vehicle warranty plus a third year of driveline cover. If a fleet operator with a hundred DAFs experienced

a transmission problem with a New Generation a month after the driveline cover expired, however, then it seems unlikely that a plea for a contribution to the repair cost would be ignored. Loyalty is a two-way street, after all, and no manufacturer wants to risk losing repeat business.

DUTY OF CARE

While vehicles are far more durable than their predecessors of 30 years ago, nothing lasts for ever. As trucks age, driver daily walk-around checks become even more important, says Towns.

Fraikin supplies trucks under contract hire with maintenance agreements. If a vehicle is six or seven years old, and the client asks for a lease extension, then depending on the circumstances, Fraikin may cap the amount of money it is willing to pay to keep it repaired and maintained, given the increased likelihood that components will wear out. The customer will have to fund any shortfall, especially if the lease has had to be extended because it failed to order replacement trucks in good time.

Observes Towns: "What we may say is that if a major unit such as an engine or gearbox fails, then we'll meet 50% of the resulting cost, with the client paying the balance."

All this presupposes that replacement parts are readily available. That is not always the case, says Towns, because manufacturers and dealers do not hold the stocks they once did.

"Wiring looms, for example, are often made to order rather than kept on the shelf," he remarks. "We've been waiting for one for over 100 days." **TE**