

# Reaching the parts

In challenging economic times, it's no surprise to find operators tempted by the promise of significant savings by going down the non-OE parts route. Brian Tinham reports

The age old adage goes, 'you get what you pay for'. Or do you? When it comes to replacement and service parts for trucks, vans, buses and coaches, most fleet managers and transport engineers would say, 'yes'. If you buy OE (original equipment), you'll almost certainly pay more than you would for pattern parts, but you get the security of genuine replacements, designed and manufactured for the job, and offered with a full manufacturer's warranty. Go for copy parts and it can be a gamble.

But that is not always the case and it's clear that, with globalisation of the commercial vehicle parts market, underpinned by the power of the Internet, fleet managers may need to challenge received wisdom.

Bob Haughton, operations director and deputy managing director at Isuzu, tells of a recent incident that sent shock waves through his company. "About six months ago, we were alerted to a couple of catastrophic failures, one involving brake linings that had parted company with the back plates. The friction material had just come away and, as it did so, finings got into the truck's ABS system, racking up about £2,000 worth of damage," he recalls.

"The customer had bought the parts as OE from a factor, so the truck came back to us for repair, under warranty. That's when we found the parts weren't ours. They had come in an Isuzu box and they looked genuine – but the pad material was wrong. We looked after the customer, with a one-off special price for the repair, and he hasn't bought from anybody else since," says Haughton.



**Bob Haughton,**  
operations director  
and deputy  
managing director  
at Isuzu

"But then we did some homework. We bought boxes of brake pads, brake discs, filters etc – all normal service parts and all in Isuzu boxes – and sent them to Isuzu Motors in Japan for analysis. And the extraordinary thing they found was that, for example, out of six filters



in a box, some would be original, but others would be copies, with the correct packaging, paint code etc, but inferior filter material. So customers were buying supposedly OE parts from independent factors, but getting a mix of ours and Chinese or Taiwanese copies."

Alarm bells rang and operators with Isuzu trucks will know that, earlier this year, the firm wrote to all its customers, explaining that it had examined 160 part numbers being offered by factors and repairers, revealing where there were problems. "We also launched a campaign covering those



parts, with prices cut to compete strongly. It cost Isuzu, in terms of margin, but it meant that our customers were protected.”

How widespread this kind of problem has become is difficult to verify. No one we interviewed was aware of any scam at this level. Almost all see the choice of OE versus aftermarket spares as a straightforward ‘horses for courses’ issue – although each has a slightly different take.

The group parts sales director at one of the largest independent commercial vehicle

remanned, reconditioned and secondhand parts – accepting that there are significant differences, in terms of risk, fit and operation.

Meanwhile, for this industry veteran, the main categories where aftermarket parts might be considered appropriate are braking, transmissions and panelwork. However, he, too, offers words of warning: “The market has changed in the last couple of years and there are a lot of product options, so operators and workshops need to choose carefully. For us, parts suppliers have to demonstrate OE quality, in terms of their manufacturing processes and product characteristics. So we tend to favour European suppliers, as opposed to Far Eastern equivalents.”

**Compromise case**

Andrew Taylor, head of UK parts for MAN, makes another point: “Whereas OE parts are engineered specifically for a vehicle, aftermarket equivalents are almost always compromise products. For example, an aftermarket clutch might span, say, 10 or 15 different variants on a TGA or TGX truck.” That means risk, both in terms of first-time fit and longevity. Even non-OE bumpers can cause problems. “In most cases, aftermarket bumpers have to be reworked, whereas OE product bolts straight on,” insists Taylor.

He also indicates related risks with fast-moving service items where, following ‘block exemption’, competitors now have significant distribution in the UK, but may not be offering exactly equivalent items. “OE brake shoes and pads, for example, may not use the same friction materials – so they might not last as long and there could be other problems,” he warns.

Certainly, Knorr-Bremse’s service instructions couldn’t be clearer on the risks around incorrect friction material when it comes to their impact on EBS systems: ‘If the braking system does not perform as the EBS expects, then the EBS attempts to compensate ... by increasing or decreasing pressures [and the] safety and stability of the vehicle deteriorates ... leading to excessive wear on the brake pads and discs’.

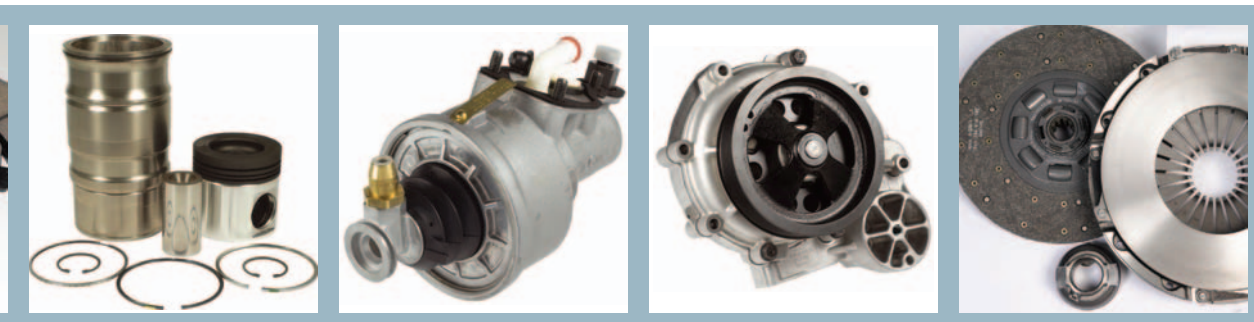
And it’s a similar story with filters: “You might get away with aftermarket filters, but you can’t be sure

**Isuzu’s Multipart operation: a slick supply chain for the commercial vehicle sector**



dealerships, which preferred not to be named, says simply that, although 85% of his firm’s turnover is OE parts (including DAF, MAN, Isuzu, Hino, Ford, VW and Fiat), the remaining 15% is non-OE – and for two good reasons. “We need to serve operators’ changing mix of vehicles, which is increasingly broader than our franchise products. We also have to respond to demands from some operators for alternatives to OE parts – especially where they have vehicles on extended lifecycle and are trying to manage costs,” he says.

And then you’re also into the argument for



## Aftermarket experience

What about the case for aftermarket parts? Dave Roylance, one of the co-directors at Swedish Truck Parts, which has more than 20 years' experience of providing parts for Volvo and Scania trucks, and latterly also several other brands, says it's all about saving operators money.

"Non genuine parts, such as suspension and running gear, can be 30% or even 50% cheaper than OE. Operators won't get the truck manufacturer's warranty, but, for a lot of hauliers, that isn't their only worry," explains Roylance.

For him, the issue is getting the right aftermarket suppliers, which he concedes is a specialist job. "We've been doing this for a long time, so we know where to get good, reliable non-OE parts from all over the world. And that includes major components, such as pistons, liners, main bearings, camshafts, crank shafts.

"We also sell to operators, garages and some distributors, so you can be sure they have confidence in us. They know we have checked out the product we sell and they know we understand what we're talking about, because we used to run our own garage and fleet of trucks before we became a retail business."

Doug Bentley, technical centre manager for UK based emissions control manufacturing facility of Klarius, which boasts around 9,000 products and includes Quinton Hazell (which covers from water pumps to brakes, shock absorbers and filtration) in the group agrees. He says that getting non-OE right is about ensuring that products are equivalent to OE specification.

"We closely replicate or improve on the performance of the original, and we homologate and type approve all our products. We accept that these products are aimed at operators of vehicles that are over three years old, but, in our case, they can be treated as like-for-like with the original fitted products."

Bentley suggests that the difference on an exhaust, for example, might be that, whereas the original may be constructed from low grade stainless steel, Klarius could use a high grade aluminised mild steel. His advice: "It is often the retailer that makes the call on price and quality, so buy from someone you trust."

As Roylance says: "We're just trying to save people money. It's as simple as that."

and it's your engine at stake," asserts Taylor, pointing to MAN's Value Line campaign, launched earlier this year, which "aligns OE service item prices more closely with the market".


What about warranty? Dave Hickman, general manager for parts operations at Scania, makes the point that, if an OE part fails, then the manufacturer covers not only the cost of a new component, but also the labour. "And we cover consequential damage, if a failed part affects another part. Also, if the vehicle breaks down as a result, we cover the cost of that as well. And we're expected to offer first pick availability on 97% of parts. That's not the

same for the independent factors, so there are big differences between OE and non-OE, in terms of support and uptime, too."

The message for operators: if you are going non-OE, choose your parts provider carefully. "We're never

going to be the cheapest, because of our high standards," advises our unnamed dealership commentator. "But we would say that managing cost is one thing; operators also have to balance downtime and safety. There are credible alternatives out there and, as a rule of thumb, operators can save 20%. However, more than that and they're into the risk game. So then it depends on whether 20% is enough of a saving, when there is always a chance that it won't fit first time and warranty won't be as good."

Isuzu's Houghton agrees: "With some parts, such as crash damage parts, it's not so critical, although we do know that copy parts don't fit or align quite so well. But almost everything else is safety-related or connected to a safety-related component – typically, brakes, steering and suspension. We would always advise OE for these parts. We would also point out that even small, high-speed diesel engines can happily clock up more than a million km, if workshops use the correct service parts at the correct intervals."

As our unnamed correspondent puts it: "In the end, much depends on whether an operator is prepared to take a gamble. Some aftermarket suppliers do a good job, but I always ask, 'What would you do, if it was your wife's car? Would you want to save 20% on servicing and repair, or would you pay the extra for peace of mind?'" 

**Dave Hickman,**  
general manager  
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