Feel the force

Goodyear's latest Gen-2 truck tyres are part of the 'internet of things'. Richard Simpson sees how this is used by the company's TruckForce service network

The truck tyre market is splitting into two: premium manufacturers are providing tyres as a service, while the budget end of the market deals with them as a price-sensitive distress purchase commodity.

This means that premium tyre manufacturers require service networks, just as truck manufacturers do. And, just like for trucks, that network is expected to provide a repair and maintenance service, including roadside breakdowns and routine servicing, as well as replacement products when required.

In the case of Goodyear, that network is branded as TruckForce, and consists of 13 Goodyear-owned hubs at strategic points on the national road network in the UK, backed by 43 privately owned dealer locations. Across Europe, there are said to be 2,000 TruckForce locations serving Goodyear's fleet customers.

And, just as truck manufacturers are grasping new technology and the internet of things to provide better service for customers through proactive preventative maintenance, so too is TruckForce. Goodyear's latest Gen-2 tyres incorporate RFID tags, and there is an increased emphasis on getting fleets to automate tyre condition monitoring: either by using drive-over pressure readers or in-tyre pressure and temperature monitors (see also *www.is.gd/epocep*). The IT input augments and assists human inspections which are the core of the TruckForce offering.

Processes are tracked and managed from start to finish. TruckForce technicians record their work on tablets, while their vans are tasked and tracked using the Ctrack telematics system. Tablets not only eliminate paperwork, they also enable technicians to make a visual record of any issues that they may encounter.

THREE TYPES OF JOB

Typically, there are three categories of job which a technician will be asked to undertake. High-priority jobs involve a truck having a tyre breakdown while on the road, while low-priority jobs relate to discovery of a problem that does not immobilise the vehicle or present any immediate danger. Then there are routine fleet inspections where a technician visits a location to carry out tyre replacements and preventative maintenance tasks.

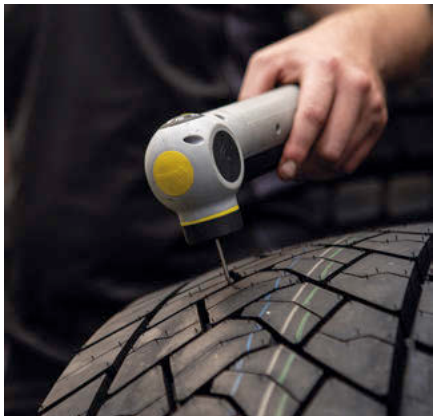
In the case of a high-priority job, TruckForce is targeted with getting a van to the scene within a 60-to-90-minute window. The target for low-priority jobs is four hours.

Customers can either contact TruckForce's Service 24 call centre in Gloucester, which will then assign the

TECHNICIAN TRAINING

For these roles, TruckForce looks to hire individuals in their 20s, who have some years of car-driving experience. Initially, they are mentored by an experienced technician, and are expected to attain City and Guilds commercial tyre fitting and roadside breakdown qualifications. (For more on training, including the irtec tyre certification, see *www.is.gd/rovuka*.) The C&G qualification is a prerequisite to being able to work at the roadside, and each technician must be assessed as competent before they can work on their own. TruckForce aims to get them to this level in six months; they then undertake periodic reassessment and have to recertify every three years. Instilled with a 'safety first' culture, technicians are empowered to call in if they feel a situation is too dangerous to attempt a repair without moving a vehicle or closing a lane of traffic.

Close monitoring means that maintenance tasks can be scheduled. Technicians use their vans for home-to-work transport, so often their first call of the day will be a pre-arranged customer visit



nearest hub, or use an online portal. The latter can reduce response times by five to 10 minutes, compared to picking up the phone. A second portal is visible to the hub manager, and indicates the status of all the current tasks for his hub.

ROUTINE INSPECTION

But most of the hub's work involves routine inspection at customers' premises. Technicians have a single handheld device that can read the tyre's RFID tag, as well as measure tyre pressure and tread depth. Another checks the operation of the tyre pressure monitoring system if fitted. Maintenance tasks include a visual inspection, pressure check and adjustment, position rotation (for example, exchanging inner and outer tyres on drive axles), and the removal and replacement of worn tyres. Close monitoring means that maintenance tasks can be scheduled. Technicians use their vans for home-to-work transport, so often their first call of the day will be a pre-arranged customer visit rather than the hub.

Removed worn tyres are returned to the hub. Goodyear operates a 'four-life' tyre programme, so worn tyres are initially given a visual inspection (which includes the careful removal of any trapped stones). Serviceable tyres are given an initial regroove when worn down to 4-5mm, which adds a further 3mm to the tread depth (typical new tread depth is 12-14mm). The technicians follow a pattern specific to each tread type, which is also available on their tablet. The operation is usually carried out on loose tyres back at the hub.

Tyres that have already been regrooved and have worn down again are given an initial inspection before being sent to Goodyear's retread plant in Riom, France for further inspection and retreading, if acceptable.

Goodyear's technicians undertake repairs to BS159AU to the treaded areas of punctured tyres. Carcasses that have been more badly damaged can sometimes be repaired, and Goodyear uses a facility in Morecambe, Lancashire to undertake this work.

A hub holds each customer's tyre stock in a dedicated storage area. Stock includes new, repaired and regrooved tyres, plus remoulds if accepted by the fleet. When a vehicle based outside of the hub's operating area is repaired at the roadside, its tyre will be returned to the customer's home hub.

Segregating customers' tyres is a key tool in keeping tyre costs visible and accountable. Even remoulded tyres are returned to the original user. Customer accounts can operate on either a pay-as-you-go or pence-per-km model, but either way the technicians are incentivised to maximise tyre life without compromising safety, compliance or reliability. TE

THE COMPETITION

Truckforce is just one of multiple commercial tyre support organisations. Two high-profile alternatives are described below.

CONTI 360

Continental offers UK fleets service through the Conti 360 Network, which has 37 partners in the UK with 422 individual depots running a total fleet of over 1,600 vans. Fitters are qualified either through Safe Contractor Accreditation or the REACT Licence to Work Safely by the Roadside. A 24-hour breakdown service aims to reach casualty vehicles in 60 minutes.

Inspection services range from visual checks to in-depth inspections that report tread depth, tyre condition, tyre pressure and torque settings. Fleet services include minor puncture repairs, cosmetic tyre repairs, major repairs, regrooving, tyre rotation, pressure checks, commercial wheel balancing, torque checks, wheel replacement (due to damage) and wheel alignment.

Additionally, the Conti 360 Network can install tyre pressure monitoring systems.

TRUCTYRE ATS

Independent company Tructyre took over the heavy vehicle tyre business previously handled by Michelin subsidiary ATS Euromaster late last year, and the two networks are in the process of being merged to create what is claimed to be the largest heavy-vehicle tyre network in the UK. A multi-brand operation, Tructyre ATS employs over 550 skilled technicians at 70 service centres in the UK.

It offers a range of services including Tructrak laser wheel alignment, TyreWatch pressure monitoring and supply of its own Re-Trak retread tyres.