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IRTE
engineering success

Engineering your chance to save serious money

Everyone chases the dream of cutting fuel bills: it's been mandated for so long, it's practically in fleet managers' DNA. Yet bitter experience has taught transport engineers that, where novel solutions are concerned, a good dose of scepticism is a very healthy approach. Promises of something for nothing rarely turn up trumps.

So it comes as some surprise that, in the first quarter of this year alone, three entirely different devices have come to light, all showing significant savings that, on the face of it, are difficult to dispute. The first was a magnetic fuel conditioner, exhaustively tested over six months during 2009 and now enthusiastically adopted by Carmarthenshire County Council (Transport Engineer, February 2010, page 40).

The second, which came to light only in the last few weeks, was a 'fuel catalyst' from the US, which scored success on a DAF truck from the John Lewis fleet at none other than the world-famous Millbrook proving ground (page 29). And the third was a one-time oil additive, for engines and transmissions, that purports to harness nano-technology and evidently reduces surface friction on moving parts – so particularly useful on older vehicles (page 47).

But these are just three among many others also claiming to improve the performance of existing vans, trucks, buses and coaches. Then there are the myriad projects working on alternative fuels and lubricants, new motor designs, vehicle and component weight-saving measures, aerodynamics, rolling resistance reduction, etc. The list is long and many involve fundamental advances in everything from materials design to propulsion system technology.

If nothing else, each of the above serves to emphasise that caution with new technology, although entirely justifiable, needs to be a two-way street. Yes, hard-nosed engineering doubt remains an invaluable, and possibly also career- and reputation-saving, tool. But, equally, if we're too quick to dismiss certain developments, we might be the ones to regret missing out.

The question that then arises, however, is clear: which new technologies do you give airtime and which do you discard? There's no magic wand here, because, by definition, they're all outside our comfort zone. So we have to use our judgement and do some prioritising.

Engineers who have, in the past, done this best are those who put themselves about: those that go the extra mile to talk, listen, network and get involved. With that in mind, the next big opportunity is the Commercial Vehicle Operator Show, from 13–15 April at the NEC, where some 250 exhibitors will be on hand for you to challenge.

Beyond that, we hope you will use the pages of this journal and its new website (www.transportengineer.org.uk). In this issue alone, you can learn, for example, about autonomous braking (page 20), automatic and 'smart' manual transmissions (page 10) and truck telematics (page 36).

All involve technologies that have been around for a while, but that have, until recently, struggled to make their cases heard. Let's set about changing that.

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