



Improving truck and van reliability has still not eliminated mechanical, electrical or electronic faults, which can prove costly. Steve Banner investigates common roadside problems and some solutions

# Street value

Scania's aftersales director Mark Grant believes that, if operators are serious about trying to reduce the risk of vehicles breaking down, they should follow the lead of the airline industry and adopt a far stricter policy of preventive maintenance. "The problem is usually an electrical glitch that causes drivers to summon roadside assistance," he asserts. "More often than not, it's the battery, the starter motor or the alternator that's the cause of the problem. And that, in many respects, is a reflection of an attitude among some UK operators that they will only replace certain items when they fail."

Unfortunately, those items are quite likely to give up the ghost when the vehicle concerned is half way through a delivery run and many miles from home. To avoid this happening, it makes far more sense to swap key electrical components as part of the truck's routine maintenance regime before they give trouble, insists Grant.

"Take batteries, for example," he continues. "They are being asked to do more than they used to, so we change those fitted to our rental trucks every 25 months. If you have to call out a dealer to give you a jump start, because the battery's gone flat, the bill is

likely to add up to three-quarters of the cost of the new battery you should have bought in the first place," he advises. That time-expired battery will also now have to be replaced, he adds – and as grim winter weather cruelly exposes the inadequacies of old batteries, the situation will only get worse.

Something else that might reduce the risk of trucks being immobilised at the roadside is better driver training, especially when it comes to starting procedures and interpreting warning lights on the dashboard. "If a driver tries to start a modern truck too quickly, and doesn't allow it to go through its self-checking procedure, then a fault code may come up," explains DAF product marketing manager Phil Moon.

Finding the handbook – which is probably sitting in a cardboard box in the traffic office, along with all the others – to figure out what the code means, or checking with home base or the vehicle manufacturer's 24-hour emergency hotline to ensure that it is safe to drive off, all takes time and normally means a delayed delivery. Calling out a dealer technician to reset the dashboard means an even longer delay and the expense.

Ensuring drivers understand the need to take their



emphasises Mair. “And we’re talking ABS, not EBS.”

Meanwhile, even if a vehicle does not come to a grinding halt, it may go into limp-home mode, which can be just as much of a problem. If it is equipped with an AdBlue tank, then it may not have been replenished and warning lights to this effect will probably have been ignored. A more likely reason for this kind of fault,


though, is that the tank was filled in grimy conditions – AdBlue systems are sensitive to dirt – or with fluid of less than ideal quality.

That said, an increasingly common reason for vehicles immobilised at the roadside – especially if they have been parked in a lay-by overnight – is that their fuel tanks have been drained. As Andrew Walker, technical and warranty manager at Renault Trucks, says, anti-siphoning devices can help deter thieves and may prompt them to turn their attention to a vehicle that is less well protected. Nevertheless, there is always the risk that they may react to the presence of such devices by simply holding the tank to steal the diesel. “Then you’ve got to pay for a replacement tank, as well as the lost fuel,” he observes.

The obvious answer is to park at a secure truck stop or in a friendly operator’s depot at night, whenever possible, and to avoid locations that have a reputation for fuel bandits. But even these precautions are not infallible.

### Flat out

A vehicle may, of course, be immobilised by nothing more complicated than a flat tyre, the repair of which may involve summoning the assistance of an emergency tyre replacement service, such as ATS. Beyond that, while some fleets run their own roadside rescue vans, a high percentage of operators rely on the manufacturer’s own emergency support service. Such services are ultimately provided by dealers and, as they are generally delivered on a pay-as-you-go basis, the operator summoning help would be well advised to ensure that arrangements for payment are already in place, suggests Walker.

It should be obvious, but he also states that help is likely to arrive more quickly, and be more effective, if the driver can give accurate details of the whereabouts of the truck and what’s wrong with it. “That way, the technician riding to the rescue can bring any parts that may be required and will not have to dash back to the dealership, because a vital component is not in the van.” 

time when firing up the engine should minimise the risk of this happening, but it will not stop other lights popping up. “Over-sensitive sensors throw up all sorts of spurious faults,” warns Freight Transport Association head of engineering policy Andy Mair.

### In the spotlight

Something that can cause considerable alarm is the ABS warning light. Until recently, VOSA enforcement officers had been following a policy of issuing an automatic prohibition, if this lit up on a truck during a journey. It was an attitude that prompted company bosses, conscious of their OCRS (Operator Compliance Risk Score), to instruct drivers to stop and phone for assistance, if the light came on, to pre-empt VOSA action.

The agency’s stance has now changed, following intensive lobbying. However, the driver does have to satisfy officials that the light did come on enroute – and not prior to departure from, say, the truck’s home depot. He will need, for example, a signed and dated defect report, providing details of when and where the light appeared, and the vehicle’s mileage. “All this only applies, if it’s the yellow light that illuminates, not the red one,”

**Left: Scania’s roadside assistance team deals with a stricken tractor**  
**Inset, top: Mark Grant, Scania**  
**Inset, bottom: Gary Bulley, Bullwell Trailer Solutions**