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Engineers

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engineering success

Turning the corner with a new fitness for purpose

Something is happening in the transport industry. Figures released recently by the SMMT (Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders), covering last year's van and truck sales, show a healthy increase in operators' purchasing patterns, compared with 2010.

Total van sales were up almost a quarter (23.7%), although medium to heavy vans in the 3.51–7.0 tonne range saw a surprising 13% decline – with almost 1,000 fewer such vans sold. Meanwhile, heavy trucks, too, witnessed a near 25% surge across the range from 3.51 to 44 tonnes, although that statistic masks a massive 52.7% leap in tractor unit sales – up to 18,403 from 12,054 units year-on-year (15,276 three-axle units and 3,127 two-axle tractors), representing the fastest growth ever recorded.

Then, in the rigids class, multi-axle vehicles saw sales jump by between 33.6% (four-axle trucks, mostly tippers) and 55.5% (for three-axle 6x2s) – although sales of three-axle 6x4/6s (particularly tippers) unsurprisingly declined 9.3%. As for two-axle rigids, only those in the 12.1–15 tonne bracket were flat at 950 units; those above 15 tonnes saw sales grow by 17.4%; while those at the bottom end (7.4–7.5 tonnes) grew by 16.% and the 7.51–12 tonners grew 8.6% (to 5,193 and 1,297 units respectively).

So what does it all mean? It's not just good news for commercial vehicle manufacturers, reflecting, if not wildly improved trading, then at least operators calling time out on preserving their now ageing fleets, post the 2008 recession. There's certainly some of that, but at another level there are some interesting trends here, which indicate changes in behaviour.

Take vans: Nigel Emms, director of press and public relations at Iveco, is one among many who believes that the large increase in van sales (up 10,742 units at 2.8–3.49 tonnes and 10,434 for 3.5 tonne vans) is due in large part to operators' changing approaches. On the one hand, it's about fleet managers in the burgeoning supermarket and related sectors using cheaper to buy, run and administer bodied 3.5 tonners, in place of heavier vans. On the other, those in the multi-drop distribution world are increasingly selecting two-axle 7.5-tonne rigids, again instead of heavy vans, in this case for their productivity and robustness advantages.

Interestingly, however, the devil is in the detail. Far from seeing sales fall in its 3.5–7.0 tonne van sector, Iveco claims a staggering 41% improvement with Daily at the heavy end. Iveco managing director Luca Sra also points to growth of 37% in Eurocargo sales, against the much more modest market rate for comparable light to medium trucks for some other manufacturers. Why? It would appear it's all about making vehicles fit for purpose, given the new reality.

With Daily, for example, the slogan is small truck performance, but in the size of a van. And that means everything from rear-wheel drive to a spread of payload weights and volumes, but at lower fuel consumption, helped by redesigned engines and transmissions. Iveco is far from alone there, but the point is well made. Transport managers putting their heads above the parapet, after an extended period of mend and make do, are likely to push harder than ever for value for money, in terms of total lifecycle costs and productivity. And they should: that, after all, is the job.

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