

# Little star

The Renault Kangoo-based Mercedes-Benz' Citan van was unveiled last month in Germany. John Challen reports from the pre-launch event



Having witnessed the small commercial van market grow from modest numbers in the 1990s to one that now accounts for 700,000 units in Europe per year, Mercedes-Benz has revealed a new contender, dubbed Citan. Keen to make its mark, the German manufacturer's new entry-level model – to be offered in panel van, crewbus and mixto variants – is targeting a market share of 5%, and says it is using quality and competitive running costs to achieve that goal.

Mercedes has been here before, of course, with the largely unspectacular Vaneo. At the Citan preview, the company admitted it had made mistakes with its predecessor, singling out the use of a passenger car chassis as among the biggest failings. This wasn't the right approach, the automotive giant conceded, insisting that the provenance of this new vehicle is very, very different.

For starters, Citan – the name derives from 'city' and 'titan' – is based on Renault's Kangoo platform and uses the same engines, albeit with some modifications. "Small changes have been made to the engine's CO<sub>2</sub> package and powertrain," hints Sascha Paasche, vice president, product engineering at Mercedes-Benz vans. Meanwhile, the interior and exterior have been heavily revised, along with the chassis, to "fit with our core brand values", as Paasche puts it. Citan also promises to be better equipped than the competition when it comes to safety features – an example being the adoption of ESP (electronic stability program) as a standard fitment.

Steve Bridge, van sales and marketing director, UK agrees that the Citan can't compete on price with the current top three from France: the Citroën Berlingo, Peugeot Partner and Renault's Kangoo. Where it will appeal, however, is on running costs, he says. "It is all about changing customer perceptions. Even major operators look at the front-end price when they are buying vans, because

that's what they're trained to do. But just because a van might be cheapest to buy, it doesn't mean it is cheapest to run. It's far better to compete on cost than on price. We will aim to have a more competitive contract hire rate than the Renault, for example."

He also says that the role of the driver is very important, in Mercedes-Benz's eyes – another reason why careful consideration was paid to quality. "Truck drivers may be seen as similar to chauffeurs: merely delivering their cargo to its destination. But van drivers provide a service and use every element of the van to do their jobs. So they have more functional requirements," reasons Bridge. And making his point, he adds: "When ParcelForce specified the [Mercedes-Benz] Sprinter for its operations, the biggest factor was driver acceptability, above and beyond all the other engineering, cost and price issues."

## No French connection

It could be argued that, unlike previous donor vehicle projects, there is little left of the Kangoo in the Citan. However, Mercedes-Benz isn't saying as much. What is clear, though, is that a lot of effort has gone in during its three-year development to get everything just right. "When we first compared competitor vehicles, we ran them on our own test programme to determine their status in the market, compared with our in-house benchmarks," recalls Paasche.

"We wanted to get quality to the level that we required and this continues, as the Citan is currently undergoing winter testing to prove quality at extreme temperatures." This theme will now carry over to the production phase, when a team of Mercedes-Benz specialists will inspect every truck as it comes off the Renault production line at Maubeuge, France.

Potential buyers will have to wait until April to see the final version of the Citan, which goes on sale in the UK during the third quarter of 2012. **TE**



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**Steve Bridge,  
Mercedes-Benz**