



Specs change

Economical and social factors are driving RCV operators to rethink some aspects of their vehicles. John Challen discovers measures being taken to boost safety and productivity, while cutting operating costs

Many new technologies appearing on commercial vehicles are not limited to trucks and vans. The same, or very similar, systems are also proving their worth on RCVs (refuse collection vehicles). Several factors, including health and safety, security and a requirement to save money and fuel on waste-handling fleets, is driving adoption, with many operators now including innovative kit in their vehicle specifications. Some are also looking beyond purchasing new models, in a bid to better balance the cost/technology equation.

One innovation has been the inclusion of extra cameras and hard disk systems on waste disposal

trucks. When RCV operator Enterprise was ordering its latest fleet of refuse vehicles for operation in the 'Square Mile' of the City of London, it selected Innovative Safety Systems to provide recording equipment – in the form of four-camera DVR hard disk recording systems – as well as training.

"Health and safety is one of our core principles, and this equipment provides us with a month's worth of recording, so we can closely monitor if our teams are working in a safe manner," explains David Martin, regional MD at Enterprise. "If there are incidents, we can find out exactly what happened and, in the event of any fraudulent insurance claims against us, footage can be used as evidence in court."

Above: Investment by Westminster Council in Hako Citymasters will save millions of pounds in fuel costs

Bob Sweetland, managing director of RCV contract vehicle hire and fleet management firm Specialist Fleet Services (SFS), reveals that his company has also seen an upsurge in requests for more health and safety equipment on its vehicles. “The cameras have picked up when vehicles go into the back of refuse trucks. But they also show when the operators themselves have damaged something,” comments Sweetland.

Camera systems are now being fitted to more than half the vehicles SFS provides and Sweetland says that number is increasing all the time, particularly for private sector operators. “We are also seeing more interest in electric bin-lifts, which have an impact on noise, as well as the fuel economy of the vehicle,” he adds. “We’ve recently taken our first orders and more people are looking at what the



Recording equipment from Innovative Safety Systems is now used on vehicles in London

manufacturers are offering, in terms of hybrid chassis. Manufacturers are close to launching these chassis and we are expecting quite a take-up of these vehicles, depending on the price.”

Such systems may soon be helping the people of Cornwall, after SFS won a £14 million contract to provide over 200 vehicles for Cory Environmental’s new contract with the county’s council for waste and recycling collections, beach and street cleansing.

Meanwhile, those operators that believe they don’t need new vehicles could do worse than talk to Spencer Law, founder and managing director at Refuse Vehicle Solutions (RVS). The company’s line in modified or remanufactured refuse trucks can provide a cost-effective alternative to buying new.

“We source a particular vehicle that the customer wants, and assess all vulnerable workings of the body, bin-lift and chassis,” explains Law. “We MOT, service and paint them, then deliver them as new, adding value in the process.” He points to a recent example of a project completed for Gravesham Borough Council, which was looking to boost its RCV fleet, but was constrained by government budget cuts. That vehicle started off as a 4x2 chassis, before the RVS team added a lift axle to make it a 24-tonner, and also took a truck and body off a fire-damaged vehicle of a similar specification.

“When you buy a second-hand vehicle, the truck dealers obviously benefit from the margin that they charge on top. I wanted to offer something different from them and those selling new vehicles,” explains Law. “We’re not a new vehicle supplier, but I didn’t want to be known as a truck dealer either.”

While Law admits his company doesn’t offer the cheapest options, for him, and his customers, it’s all about the quality. “If there’s a defect on the vehicle, or a common problem with a vehicle from a particular manufacturer, it is put right. Some of our vehicles might cost £60,000 to buy, but they are immaculate when we are finished with them.”

The flexibility and options provided by RVS have allowed many private operators to save a lot of money, but in recent months it has been local authorities, too – namely Coventry, Gravesham and Swindon – that have been beating a path to his door. “Last year, we sold 53 vehicles and only three of those were to local authorities,” states Law. “But the Swindon contract alone was for six vehicles. That contract went out to tender and, while they aren’t remanufactured vehicles, they are still high quality, defect-free, repainted vehicles that have had an MOT and service before delivery.”

Crucially, Law insists that the cost of those six RCVs was no more than just two equivalent new vehicles. Martin Britchford, fleet buyer for Swindon Commercial Services, is a happy man. “When the [first] vehicle was delivered, it was difficult to tell it apart from a new one,” he recalls. “If we can get the equivalent lifetime and operational standards from remanufactured vehicles as we can from new vehicles, we can provide a much better value-for-money service.”

Multi-purpose vehicles

Elsewhere, Westminster is another local authority that has recently taken an innovative approach to its waste and recycling activities. In a move that, it is claimed, will save “millions of pounds”, the London borough has unveiled a fleet of street cleaning vehicles that can double up as pavement gritters. With the addition of a simple attachment, its Hako Citymasters can transform from cleaning the streets to keeping them safe for pedestrians.

Westminster’s fleet of 70 rubbish trucks – complete with fuel-saving packs, improved engine management, GPS and quieter hydraulics – are predicted to save more than £300,000 a year in fuel costs alone, according to the council. Cllr Ed Argar, Westminster City Council cabinet member for city management, says: “Westminster is constantly searching for ways to make sure residents and businesses are given the best value for money.

“Our new fleet is a great symbol of the investment we are making to keep our city clean – reducing noise and helping the environment in the process, without spending more money.” 