

# Spoilt for choice

Increasing reliance on diagnostics in commercial vehicle workshops is driving the growth of tools designed to handle multiple brands, all the way from car-derived vans to HGVs and PSVs. Steve Banner examines improvements



Operators in search of workshop tools that will allow them to diagnose faults across multiple vehicle types and brands, without spending a fortune, cannot complain about a lack of choice. Aware of workshops' growing dependence on such systems, an increasing number of players are launching ever more sophisticated systems in what is becoming an increasingly competitive market sector.

Just over a year ago, for example, Snap-On Diagnostics introduced its first truck and trailer diagnostics package. Sold under the Sun brand, it uses software developed by Spanish commercial vehicle parts specialist Cojali. "The [suite] can be loaded onto a ruggedised tablet PC and the technician using it can walk around the vehicle, thanks to a Bluetooth connection with the system," states Snap-On Diagnostics UK sales director Mark Ost. "Additionally, a camera can be incorporated, so that pictures can be taken of any damaged or faulty components."

Photographic evidence can be invaluable, he points out, particularly if we're talking about

warranty claims. It can also be useful if the workshop is diagnosing and repairing faults for a third party and the company wants hard evidence to justify the bill.

"Our system is also able to offer on-the-road diagnostic assistance," Ost adds. "If a driver breaks down at the side of the road, with various lights up on the instrument panel, he or she can ring the workshop and tell the technicians which ones are illuminated. They can then consult the Sun tool and identify likely problems, so that they get the right parts prior to going out to fix the truck."

But such wide-ranging functionality makes it a fast-moving technology. Although this package has barely been out a year, Snap-On has already issued three updates, all on memory sticks. "What we have to offer is available in seven languages; it's sold all over Europe; and workshops in some countries do not have the ability to receive upgrades as a download over the Internet," Ost explains.

Not to be outdone, Actia Muller has just introduced a new version of its Multi-Diag Trucks



**Mark Ost:**  
**"Our system is also able to offer on-the-road diagnostic assistance"**

diagnostics. “Furthermore, we’ve just signed a deal with TecDoc,” says Actia UK marketing and communications executive Robin Edwards. “Click on the link and you can identify the parts you’re going to need.”

### Longing for leads

With virtually all diagnostics systems, the tool is connected to the truck, bus or coach via a plug-in lead, with different configurations, according to the type and brand of vehicle for Multi-Diag Trucks – and, in some cases, two or three leads plugged in simultaneously. This is especially the case with buses and coaches, because body and chassis are frequently constructed by different manufacturers. Indeed, Actia’s communication kit contains no fewer than 20 leads.

“Since 2001, all cars have been fitted with a standard EOBD [European OnBoard Diagnostics] connector – and they’re installed on all light commercials, too. But only since the advent of Euro 5 has this affected larger vehicles,” explains Dave Gordon, sales manager at Texa (UK). Hence, in some cases, the variety of leads: either way, however, a universal diagnostics tool still obviates the requirement for expensive tools from each of the vehicle manufacturers. It also makes it less likely that the operator or workshop will have to call in a franchised dealer’s diagnosticians to identify a fault – and pay for the privilege.

Universal packages also look set to see greater uptake, given that VOSA is implementing changes to the MoT test regime in the coming months that will involve additional checks on the growing number of electronic safety systems fitted to vehicles. Areas set to be addressed include the ABS and other stability systems.

The new checks will not result in vehicles being failed until later in the year – to give testers and operators time to prepare for the changes. But, with the clear need for workshops to check and clear faults and warning lights prior to presenting vehicles for test, the demand for universal diagnostics tools can only go

one way. Operators wanting to record as near to 100% first-time pass rates as possible are going to make sure of that.

### Data protection

One problem, though: it is, alas, not always easy for independent suppliers of diagnostics systems to acquire up-to-date data from the vehicle



Actia has recently introduced a new version of its Multi-Diag Trucks diagnostics kit

manufacturers themselves. It helps if you are an OE supplier – Actia and Delphi have certainly found this to be the case. Also, manufacturers may be willing to provide the requisite information under licence. It may, however, be necessary occasionally to obtain data over the Internet from countries where it is more freely available. “Reverse engineering may be required on occasions,” suggests Paul Chaundy, Delphi’s business line director for service.

Delphi launched its Truck Diagnostic Solution just over two years ago. It is said to be capable of diagnosing faults on virtually all makes of truck and van, as well as on Haldex, Knorr-Bremse and Wabco equipment fitted to trailers. Like most diagnostics tools, this one includes wiring diagrams and Delphi’s help desk can take control remotely, if needs be, to assist a technician in solving a particularly knotty problem.

“It doesn’t happen all that often, but it’s something we can do on request,” says Chaundy. Again, like most diagnostic tools, it can also actuate certain functions on the vehicle for test purposes: for example, raise and lower the air suspension.

For the record, prices of universal diagnostics systems vary, but the Sun package costs £6,495, including two heavy-duty carrying cases containing the software, a robust tablet PC, the interface and all the leads. Remember also that, with most manufacturers, ongoing access to software upgrades and a technical helpline is a chargeable add-on. Three annual upgrades may cost £600 to £700 in total.

Finally, be advised: diagnostic tools are not a panacea for all a vehicle’s ills. As Actia UK’s Edwards warns: “They are not there to fix the fault. They are there to find the fault. Technicians still have to understand all the systems on a truck or a bus and how they all work together.” **TE**

Snap-On’s Sun diagnostics kit can be updated easily via memory stick

