

Cutting costs without compromising is important at the best of times – even more so during a double-dip recession. Keith Read rounds up ideas and innovations aimed at reducing LCV operators' outgoings and boosting the bottom line

Several years of intense pressure on LCV operators to save money have not gone unnoticed, either by manufacturers launching new models or the associated service providers. April's major CV Show at the NEC was testament to that observation, with a range of commercial vehicle launches and add-on offerings all focusing hard on cost-cutting potential, not just improvements in terms of fitness for purpose and/or flexibility.

Ford's global debut of its Transit Custom, for example, majored not only on the stylish new 1-tonner's range of long- and short-wheelbase van, kombi and double-cab-in-van models, available later this year. It also played up the



Great saves

Transit's reputation for low cost of ownership and its economical Stage V engines, as well as some useful extras that would normally cost owners hard cash.

For example, the new van's integrated roof rack system comes as standard, so owners won't have to stump up for a roof rack. It can also be folded flat when not required, thereby reducing aerodynamic drag and fuel consumption. And it's significantly lighter than most after-market racks, which also leads to marginally reduced fuel consumption.

A small point maybe, but also standard on Transit Custom will be a load liner that would normally set you back a bit. What's more, it will protect your vehicle throughout its life, so potentially adding to residual values.

Rough with the smooth

But some improvements go considerably further than providing useful extras. Some van owners and operators, for example, have a need to negotiate unsurfaced roads and other more difficult terrain – not to forget frequent adverse weather in

mountainous regions – during their day-to-day work. One way of meeting this challenge is to buy full-blown 4x4 off-road vehicles that, without exception, cost significantly more than 2WD vehicles. However, Peugeot used the CV Show to promote its answer for the operator who wants some extra ground clearance and traction, without going to the expense of a 4x4 – Grip Control.

Grip Control versions of the French manufacturer's latest vans – marketed under the ATV (all-terrain vehicle) identity – cost from £640 on top of standard vehicle sticker prices. For that you get an enhanced traction control system, under-engine protection tray and up-rated winter tyres, as well as some 'nice to haves' not directly linked to improved traction or off-road capability.

The point is that, by individually managing wheel slip, Grip Control noticeably improves traction, at least up to a point. And the most appropriate of five driving modes suited to the terrain – standard, sand, snow, mud and ESP – can be selected with a dial on the fascia.

Recently introduced on Peugeot's 3008 Crossover, Grip Control has now been extended to

Effective fleet management can make a big contribution in reducing vehicle running costs





for ways to further reduce fuel costs and improve the efficiency of its drivers. "We invested in TomTom having been quickly convinced it could cut our fuel consumption and help monitor and improve driver behaviour," explains operations director Peter Fairey, who identified TomTom's tracking and Remote Link Working Time system as the key technologies for his needs. And there are plenty of van operators who might well come to the same conclusion.

Meanwhile, Trafficmaster's three-in-one telematics system focuses more on saving money by increasing productivity. While its Smartnav satellite navigation and Trackstar stolen vehicle tracking systems are perhaps best known, Fleet Director is probably the key to meaningful operational improvements. And for buyers of Citroen LCVs, there is a compelling reason to find

out more about Trafficmaster: its hardware and three years' free Smartnav and Trackstar come as a standard, cost-saving fitment. Upgrading to Fleet Director costs £19.95 a month and doesn't involve any vehicle downtime or cost, in terms of fitting the in-vehicle equipment.

Also, while mentioning Citroen, it's worth noting that, like its sister company Peugeot, it, too, offers a semi-off-road, two-wheel-drive van – although rather more conventional. The Berlingo XTR+ has been around for some time and employs a traditional multi-plate, limited-slip

differential. It also sports a rugged sump guard, up-rated tyres and increased ride height, among other features, to provide 4x4-ish capability at a much lower cost than the full package. Unlike Peugeot's electronically-controlled Grip Control option, however, Berlingo XTR+ is offered as a distinct model in its own right.

More traction technologies

That said, because Fiat and PSA share production facilities, it's no surprise that the Italian company's LCVs now have a similar option to Peugeot's Grip Control for improved traction at lower cost than a 4x4. Fiat calls its system Traction+. It is operated by a button on the dash and can be engaged on the fly at speeds of up to 19mph.

But it was Fiat's award-winning eco:Drive and the version for commercial vehicle drivers – eco:Drive Professional – that caught my eye. The latter is available on any vehicle fitted with Fiat's Blue&Me telematics package and helps drivers learn to use less fuel, so reducing CO₂ emissions and claiming to save up to 15% in overall running costs.



Advanced telematics systems becoming more commonplace on vans and LCVs



L1 HDi 90 850 Partner vans in both S and SE trim levels. Bipper and Expert models are also available with Grip Control. According to Phil Robson, fleet and used car director at Peugeot UK, controlling the wheels electronically is more efficient and effective than a conventional, mechanical, limited-slip differential. Critics may argue otherwise, but there will be a place for this development, particularly given the cost saving.

Elsewhere, telematics are growing in importance, as they are recognised as providing additional sophistication and operational control, together leading to efficiencies that, less than a couple of decades ago, would have seen the light of day only in science fiction. Today, LCV operators can choose from several top-flight systems from well-known providers and be confident of improving efficiency, cutting costs and probably improving service to their customers, too.

TomTom Business Solutions, for example – one of the fastest-growing telematics companies in Europe – recently won praise from Somerset-based South West Coaches, which is rolling out a fleet management system (see page 4), after searching

Steve Coffin,
marketing and
operations director,
MiX Telematics





Above: Fiat Professional lets you get to grips with its new traction control kit
Below: EcoDrive is also new from the Italian company

Van operators can get a free download of eco:Drive software to their PCs or laptop computers. Then, by plugging a USB stick into the vehicle's Blue&Me port, data, including acceleration, deceleration, gearshift and speed, can be collected for transfer to the computer and subsequent analysis. The eco:Drive software does the manipulation and provides all the information, with comparisons showing money saved.

A further development is eco:Drive Fleet, which additionally allows transport and fleet managers to monitor all data from the vehicles they supervise via an on-line dashboard. This automatically updates the database, providing everything from management costs to the mileage count for maintenance intervals.

Tracking reduced costs

Back on the Telematics theme, and MiX Telematics – whose products were formerly marketed under the VDO brand and sold by Siemens VDO for a decade – unveiled two interesting partnerships. The agreements – with Towergate Underwriting Group and Euroway – cover the two key areas of insurance and contract hire where, according to marketing and operations director Steve Coffin, telematics can generate sizeable additional savings.

“As the telematics industry continues to move towards maturity, it is important that we demonstrate new and innovative ways to enhance the fuel and other cost savings our operators are routinely achieving,” he says. “As well as improving fuel efficiency, our solutions can help to reduce accident rates, minimise driveline wear and tear, and monitor how drivers perform and vehicles are used. All these have a direct bearing on the cost of operation.”

All good points: while van and LCV manufacturers may bend over backwards to provide low-emission, fuel-efficient engines, the one

thing they can't do is train the driver. And Mix Telematics is not the only game in town supporting driver monitoring and training. Exeter-based Ashwoods Automotive, for example, is now offering its Lightfoot product – also debuted at the CV Show – as a purpose-designed unit aimed directly at improving driver performance, and so reducing fuel bills and the cost of wear and tear on vehicles.

As David Balchin, head of sales at Ashwoods Automotive, puts it, Lightfoot ‘talks’ to the driver, using audible warnings and visual prompts to improve behaviour and ultimately also efficiency. Although designed initially for Ford's Transit, the device will soon be in production and available in a generic format suitable for almost any LCV, he says. Most important, though, Balchin states that, at a cost of £250 fitted, plus a monthly subscription, payback for most buyers comes after just five months.

Balchin happily quotes statistics that show just how cash savings stack up. “In blind trials, we've seen improvements in fuel economy as high as 23.3%, where the driver wasn't very good to start with, while the least improvement was 8%. That particular driver was an incredible 66% efficient before using Lightfoot,” he explains. “So we've taken a 14% improvement as the basis for our cost-saving calculator, although my gut feeling is this is a fairly conservative figure.”

Conservative or not, taking a fleet of 15 Transits covering a total of 300,000 miles a year at a typical 28mpg, with diesel at 138p/litre, purchase at £250 per vehicle fitted and a four-year, £11-per-month vehicle subscription, average annual savings with Lightfoot would be £626 per vehicle, or almost £9,400 per annum for the fleet. That works out at more than £37,500 over the four years of the subscription. For operators for whom green credentials are important, there's the added bonus of an estimated annual two tonnes per vehicle reduction in CO₂ emissions to boot.

Finally, back on the vans themselves, and it's worth mentioning Vauxhall's British-built Vivaro ecoFlex Euro 5 panel vans, which, according to Steve Bryant, Vauxhall's commercial vehicle brand manager, could save operators more than £800 over three years, compared to standard Vivaro models.

How? Bryant says that ecoFlex benefits from a range of green technology, including optimised gear ratios, improved thermal management, low rolling resistance tyres and an aerodynamic kit. For those wanting to save even more, Vauxhall offers Vivaro ecoFlex Euro 5s, additionally equipped with a fixed speed limiter claimed to yield CO₂ levels as low as 174g/km and with combined fuel economy of up to 42.7mpg. Interestingly, even the popular Vivaro nine-seater Combi is now available as an ecoFlex model. **TE**

