

Spot the difference?

Independent aftermarket parts suppliers may say you pay a premium for brand names, but the OEMs argue it's all about quality, availability and warranty. Steve Banner offers advice from the industry



Truck manufacturers and their dealers, on one hand, and independent distributors, on the other, are engaged in a no-holds-barred battle to win aftermarket parts business from operators. The two tribes fling accusations at each other, rather in the way that industry execs launched scathing attacks on their competitors during the hard-fought SCR (selective catalytic reduction) versus EGR (exhaust gas recirculation) debate over meeting the Euro 5 emissions regulations a few years ago.

Arguing strongly that truck operators – and bus and coach fleets, too – should buy their spares from franchised outlets is MAN director of aftersales Vince Welsh. Go that route, he says, and you can be sure you will always be sold the genuine article. Nor will you encounter availability problems, even if your vehicle is no longer in the first flush of youth.

“We are obliged to supply parts for trucks up to 10 years after the model in question was last produced and we must have those items available in our warehouses,” he explains. It’s an expensive commitment. “We carry £12m worth of MAN parts, including slow-moving items – we cannot cherry-pick – at our central warehouse in Swindon, and on

occasions that figure rises to £14m. In addition, we have 70 dealers running 150 parts delivery vans between them and typically they hold stock worth £300,000 to £500,000 each. And our first-pick rate at dealer level is 90%, rising to 98% at Swindon.” Thereafter, the UK operation can enlist the support of MAN in Germany.

Parts provenance

Welsh does not deny that MAN sources many of its components from third-parties that often run their own aftermarket distribution networks. As a consequence, exactly the same part fitted as OE can often be purchased, albeit in a different box, from either a dealer or an independent distributor. And the latter may offer it at a lower price.

Be careful about making such comparisons, though, warns Welsh. “We offer a 12 months parts and labour warranty on everything. This means, if you buy a part from us, fit it yourself and it fails during that time, we won’t just replace it. We’ll fit the new item for you.” Not many parts distributors and factors offer that level of service, he contends.

“Something else we’ve recently started doing is

Comparisons of OE versus third party need to consider availability and service, not just technical equivalence



“We carry £12m worth of MAN parts, including slow-moving items. We cannot cherry-pick” Vince Welsh, MAN director, aftersales

offering guaranteed parts price agreements over two to five years,” he advises.

But Welsh is not alone in pushing the value of OE spares. “Take a part out of one of our blue boxes and there’s still a lot left inside,” comments Greg Williams, Volvo’s product sales and marketing manager for the commercial aftermarket. “Take one out of an independent supplier’s brown box and all you are left with is an empty box.”

Williams is referring to the package of benefits that come with this OEM’s spares. In his case, this includes a parts and labour warranty lasting up to three years, if the item has been fitted in a Volvo dealer’s workshop.

So what of the other side of the story? Entering the battle on behalf of the independent sector is Jonathan Allen, field marketing manager at Federal-Mogul Aftermarket. Its range of Beral and Ferodo friction materials and related items is available through some 100 outlets, and can meet the requirements of virtually every truck on the market, he points out.

Horses for courses

Go to a franchised dealer and, in most cases, all you get are items for the trucks that dealer sells. Few manufacturer-backed, all-makes parts schemes have been successful – DAF’s TRP programme (which also encompasses trailers) being among the notable exceptions. Furthermore, distributors, such as those Federal-Mogul uses, can offer parts made to OE specifications, alongside less expensive items that remain fit for purpose and may be right for an older vehicle no longer used on demanding duty cycles.

“In the case of friction materials, they may be less durable than OE parts and may be a little noisier, too, but they’re perfectly safe to use,” says Allen. And he adds that franchised dealers may not have the scope to offer such a choice.

Meanwhile, Brian Spratt, chief executive of the Independent Automotive Aftermarket Federation, offers another angle. “There’s also the point that

independent distributors often provide a quicker and more regular delivery service than franchised dealers do,” he says. And he dismisses the argument that failing to fit dealer-sourced parts will damage a vehicle’s residual value. “There’s anecdotal evidence, but very little in terms of hard facts,” contends Spratt. “The important thing is to be able to show that the truck has been serviced regularly.”

Although it should be stressed that they do not usually include labour or breakdown recovery, warranties provided by independent suppliers can, in other respects, be as comprehensive as those offered by truck manufacturers. Take Knorr-Bremse: “We provide a year’s warranty in most cases, with a two-year warranty on callipers and up to three years on certain trailer-related parts,” says Tim Ford, the brakes specialist’s commercial vehicle sales and marketing manager.

Elsewhere, vehicle heat exchanger firm Grayson Thermal Systems says the parts it sells in the aftermarket are tested and manufactured to exactly the same standard as those fitted on the production line. As for warranties, managing director Stuart Hateley says parts sold through its distributor network and its own branches carry a minimum 12-month warranty. And he adds that they can be up to 50% cheaper than equivalent components sold in fancier boxes.

Spratt reminds us that the European Union’s Block Exemption rules prevent vehicle manufacturers from claiming that their warranty has been invalidated solely because somebody has fitted a part that was not bought through a dealer. All that is required to maintain warranty is that components used must be of an equivalent quality.

That said, the situation with trailers is somewhat different, because, as Spratt points out, Block Exemption doesn’t apply here. As a consequence, trailer axle and suspension system manufacturer BPW is able to state that the warranty it provides only remains valid, if BPW-branded spares are always used during service and repair work.

“Operators run the risk of facing hefty repair bills when non-genuine parts are fitted,” claims aftermarket manager Stephen Bestwick. “At best, these parts can contribute to rapid wear and tear of the equipment: at worst, an accident.” He adds: “We’re not denying there are some good products out there, but there are some terrible products, too. We’ve seen non-genuine pads used that have caused the brake disc to overheat and that’s had a knock-on effect on the grease inside the hub.”

For Spratt, it’s about drawing a sharp distinction between good-quality parts made by established manufacturers and sold through reputable factors, and dodgy, versus shoddily-made counterfeits, shipped in from who knows where. “The latter should be rejected by every right-minded individual,” he insists. 