

Distribution dramatics



With glitzy launches of long-distance trucks from the Germans, Swedes and Dutch, the short-haulers might be forgiven for thinking of themselves as less glamorous. Ian Norwell goes to Düsseldorf to test-drive what's new from Daimler for the short-radius distribution market

Fleet engineers who specify long distance tractor-trailer combinations have largely settled into the familiar combination of six axles on 44 tonnes and, despite the lobby groups' pressure for longer and heavier, they look set to be the staple for a while.

For short radius distribution operators, there's no obviously similar template, and they need to keep on their toes and be alive to new options. Legislation changes and technology advances can make yesterday's non-runner a prospect now worth a second look. So, to address such points, Daimler wheeled out its new Antos heavy-duty, short-radius distribution truck for the press in Düsseldorf and brought some smaller siblings along for an airing.

Cube or Gross?

Antos rigs and tractors come with three cab options and 13 power ratings from three engine displacements, all at Euro 6. As driving experiences go, I wasn't surprised that the Antos felt like a mini-Actros. But, from the transport engineer's perspective, the trickle-down effect of technology already developed for the Actros means that the maintenance and telematics elements of this distribution truck get the benefit of a bigger brother. And driving it through Düsseldorf's urban setting

confirmed that the 2.3 metre cab is as big as you'd want and the right choice to keep damage rates down.

It's also the first model I can recall that has started life with no manual gearbox. Mercedes' PowerShift 3 automated manual is standard, but with an eight-speed version, as well as the familiar twelve. Fleet buyers can temper a little frustration, if their operations have either high cube demands or they are desperate for every ounce of payload.

Two Antos variants are designed to eke out the cube and gross, and, being quaintly named in mid-European pidgin as the Loader and the Volver, they have made serious moves on the two issues. An Antos 1835 4x2 Loader tractor will sit snugly on a weighbridge with a 5,840kg tare on display, and the equivalent Volver boasts a frame height of just 90cm. Efforts to take weight out for fleet productivity have included a chassis frame with a cheese-grater appearance. This is also designed to give bodybuilders the widest latitude, without drilling or cutting. Passenger seat deletion, extensive use of aluminium, smaller batteries and a "weight-optimised" windscreen all help cut the kilos.

On a charge

On a lighter note, Daimler's Fuso Brand now includes its Canter light truck with a revised diesel/electric variant. After operator trials at 7.5 tonnes lasting over three years in London, where a claimed 27% fuel benefit was gained, it has moved on. Indeed, Daimler has produced a hybrid truck of which it is now sufficiently confident to sell direct.

That marks it out from the competition, which has been unable to get over the high battery cost that typically inflates chassis prices by 100%. DAF's LF Hybrid takes the pragmatic route of offering the truck on lease terms, as does the Mercedes Atego

Above: The new Antos heavy-duty, short-radius truck comes with three cab options and 13 power ratings, all at Euro 6

Below: the all-electric Vito E-Cell, with a 130km range and payload up to 850kg – but watch the economics





at 12 tonnes. But this Canter Hybrid will be sold in Europe as a chassis, with an €8,500 premium over the regular diesel.


Technical changes include the integration of the electric motor into the gearbox, with an increased output from 35kW to 40kW, and battery packs that are 30% lighter. The changes are claimed to provide a payback in 3–4 years at 40,000km per annum. Let's hope the market shares the maker's enthusiasm. Fuso's European production plant in Tramagal, Portugal, will be building over 1,000 each year from now on. A dual clutch transmission and regenerative braking make the driving simple and it takes away the concept of coasting, which feels like braking, because it is.

Electric performance

Meanwhile, not yet able to make the move to direct sale – simply due to battery costs– is the all-electric Vito E-Cell. With a 130km range and payload up to 850kg, it has the eerily silent demeanour of all electric vehicles. The economics, however, are complex. Only available on lease at around €1,000 a month, compared to €600 for a straight diesel, the tariff for recharging dominates the equation. Bold potential savings of around €150 per month are claimed, but the increased lease figure and European electricity tariffs of such variance will mean a lot of work on the calculator and just a little leap of faith.

The green credentials appear undeniable, though, particularly for inner city application – although closer examination of the 'well-to-wheel' data might not be so straightforward. If a spritely getaway, an 85kph top speed and a five-hour recharge suits, maybe order one in green.

Finally, Mercedes' Sprinter van's credentials are well established and it has dabbled with a few non-manual gearboxes over time. The high horsepower, torque converter, 4.6 tonne variants have long been favoured by the blue light fraternity where two pedals and rapid response come before fuel economy. Automated manuals like the SprintShift were not taken up in large numbers, but Daimler is having another go at it, with a raid on the parts bins at its luxury car division.

The Sprinter is now available with the Mercedes 7G-Tronic, as widely used in its E- and S-Class cars. Although a traditional fluid coupling, together with a new longer rear-axle ratio, the seven-speed box claims to get closer than ever to the fuel economy of a manual. With fifth gear close to direct drive, and sixth and seventh both overdrives, the top gear ratio is 0.728:1. For owner-drivers maybe, but I think it will take a brave fleet buyer to order a clutch of them and let his drivers' right boots taste the power. 



Above: Daimler's Fuso brand now includes this revised diesel-electric Canter hybrid 7.5-tonner for sale, not lease
Below: The Sprinter is now available with the Mercedes 7G-Tronic, as widely used in its E- and S-Class cars

