

Form and FUNCTION



While modern vans have to be robust, flexible, efficient and economical, they also have to look good. Steve Banner talks to designers of the new Transit Connect

While operators of light commercials may be primarily concerned about fuel economy, reliability, service intervals, ease of repair and carrying capacity, what a van looks like also matters. It matters for the company's image; it matters to drivers who prefer to be behind the wheel of something that looks good; and it influences residual values.

So how do you create an LCV that turns heads, yet is still a practical, cost-effective, cargo shifter? That was the task faced by designers at the Ford Technical Centre at Dunton, Essex, when a team of 50 to 60 began work on the latest version of Transit Connect, due to arrive in dealerships later this year.

"We spent ages talking to van operators," says design manager Paul Wraith, who insists that designers do not occupy an ivory tower. "We listen to what they say and it influences the way our vehicles look," he continues. "Look at the headlights, for example. Customers tell us that they don't like big ones, because they fear their size will expose them to damage, meaning they will have to be replaced more frequently."

Consequently, the new Transit Connect has slim headlights set quite high. "That's despite the fact that big headlights are fairly cheap, which is why so many manufacturers fit them,"

Wraith remarks. And again with the aim of avoiding damage, the front fog lights have protective frames around them, while the tail lights are also set high.

As for overall looks, whereas the old Transit Connect was square-cut and tough-looking, its successor is expected to appeal to people carrier buyers. Like the outgoing model, it will fulfil both roles. Hence the newcomer's more flowing, sculpted lines and what Wraith describes as its 'unified window graphic'.

In passenger car guise, the side windows flow into one another. "We've avoided the sub-divided look, which can make a vehicle appear too short or tall," says Wraith. And he adds: "Incidentally, the shut lines have to be as tight as on a Mondeo. Saying it's just a van, so it doesn't matter, isn't good enough."

Serious protection

But none of this is at the expense of van practicality. "We've gone for a big side moulding, to protect the bodywork, and a rocker moulding lower down to stop stones clattering off the wheels and peppering the paintwork," explains Wraith. Furthermore, there are offsets up to an inch deep in places, with the aim of defending some of the van's more vulnerable body areas.

"Commercial vehicles get damaged, no matter how careful their drivers are, so they have to be robust," comments Wraith. And the same applies to the interior, which also has to look good, yet remain practical. Bringing all this to life involves extensive use of CAD (computer aided design) software. But it also still necessitates clay models. Wraith explains

that expert moulders, many with backgrounds as pattern makers, create full-scale mock-ups for the team. "Colour is brought to them through thin coloured-plastic sheets," he adds.

The need to make the vehicle as aerodynamic as possible, to minimise fuel consumption, also has a key influence on its looks. So do the requirements of the powertrains (the new Connect is being offered with a 1.6-litre diesel, as well as the 1.0-litre EcoBoost petrol engine). So does legislation. So do budgetary concerns. And there's the requirement that any new light commercial must have the Ford family look. Something of which the Dunton team is well aware. **TE**



Dunton's tools of the trade: full-scale clay models and colour count