

Common sense perhaps, but a structured review of all bus and coach maintenance policies and procedures is a good starting point for ensuring reliable operations at best value, argues Steve Banner

Counting



Bus fleets wanting to reduce their maintenance bills should start by reviewing their spares purchasing policy. So says Ed Pedder, general manager for major accounts at parts specialist Intertruck. Opting to use an independent distributor, rather than a main dealer, can be a cost-effective choice that need not involve compromise, he argues.

Dismissing popular claims that to meet OE quality, spares simply have to be packed in boxes bearing the bus manufacturer's brand, he points out that most parts are developed and made by specialists, not vehicle assemblers. The latter simply bring them together on the production line, while the firms that make them also sell them into the aftermarket.

As a consequence, OE components can be placed next to one another, and the only differences will be the colour of the boxes and their logos. "On most occasions, however, the item without the vehicle manufacturer's brand on the box is likely to be priced more favourably," claims Pedder. And dealing with businesses such as Intertruck (which has over 30 branches nationwide) has the further advantage that they are one-stop shops catering for all manufacturers. "Few operators run single-make fleets, and sourcing parts from a range of main dealers involves the complexities and costs of dealing with multiple suppliers," he observes.

While some chassis makers have introduced all-makes parts programmes over the years, by no means all have been an unmitigated success.

Vehicle manufacturers and their dealers will, of course, argue that their warranty may be more generous and that independent distributors are only interested in stocking fast-moving parts. They may have a point, but playing one side off against the other can work to a bus operator's advantage.

Whatever your approach, something that all operators should avoid is cheap non-OE spares, according to Mark Wallis, customer service and aftersales director at Optare. Sometimes referred to as spurious parts, the odds are they will not last as long as OE items. As a result, vehicles may well experience additional downtime while faulty components are removed and replaced.

OE pedigree

Pedder knows that independent suppliers are often associated with spurious parts and this is an association he rejects. "We deal directly with leading OE manufacturers, and are totally confident about the integrity and OE pedigree of our products," he insists. But not all factors may, hand on heart, be able to say the same, so operators should be careful about whom they deal with and what they buy.

That is also the case when it comes to purchasing tyres, says Arthur Gregg, UK sales and marketing director, commercial, at Continental. "Since 2008, we've seen a lot of bus fleets switch to cheaper tyre brands, in a bid to cut expenditure," he observes. He is not suggesting that, by doing so, they are endangering passengers' lives. However,

Above: MAN Starliner coach, passing with flying colours

the cost



Left: MAN Truck and Bus technician and lead supervisor getting to grips with vehicle inspection

control maintenance costs should consider investing in suitable software. Among other things, VMS (and others like it) covers scheduled servicing, statutory inspections and defect reporting. It also includes a graphical workshop bay planner for allocating scheduled and unscheduled activities, and allows the user to print job cards. All such systems enable operators to see exactly what is going on in their workshops and to identify where savings can be made, without compromising safety.


Obvious precautions

That said, while it may seem obvious, all operators should maintain their bus fleets in line with the manufacturers' recommendations. To do otherwise is a false economy that may result in harm to the vehicles concerned. As Opare's Wallis puts it: "Companies such as Mercedes [Optare uses its engines] lay down oil change intervals in line with the testing they have carried out over the years." While maintenance schedules can be adjusted in line with duty cycles, to lengthen drain intervals for no other reason than a desire to save on a few litres of oil and a filter is a measure likely to backfire in the long run.

Something else that may backfire is looking to save costs by closing your own workshop and outsourcing the work to a dealer, without proper safeguards. By doing so, you are effectively placing your 'O' licence in the hands of a third party. There is no point blaming a dealership, if you end up appearing before the traffic commissioner, because its maintenance turned out to be suspect.

Hence the value of the IRTE's independently assessed Workshop Accreditation scheme. Get this right and maintenance contracts – covering everything from servicing to statutory inspections and MOT testing — give operators the benefit of being able to predict a big chunk of their costs.

Nor do the vehicles necessarily have to be shipped out to a dealership, says Ian McLean, MAN's UK head of bus and coach. "I can think of at least one instance where we have three MAN technicians who carry out servicing work in the operator's own workshop," he observes. And MAN is as adept as any operator, when it comes to maintaining records that will satisfy VOSA inspectors.

Nor should it be assumed that dealers work to a lower standard than fleet workshops, he insists. "Seventy per cent of the warranty claims we handle involve vehicles that we have not maintained," he reveals. 

they may be compromising profitability. "The trouble is that, if you opt for tyres that are 20% cheaper than the better-known brands, you may only get 50% of the mileage out of them," he explains. "Furthermore, whereas a premium tyre casing is likely to fetch £40–50, a casing with one of the bottom-end brand names may be worth nothing."

Gregg argues that it makes better sense to stick to an established name and look after your tyres. Among other things, that means checking the pressures regularly. "Up to 80% of vehicles may be running on tyres that are 10–15% under pressure, despite the fact that under-inflating a tyre by 10% can reduce its mileage by 20%," he comments.

Keeping tyres on track should not be a problem for operators on a PPK (pence per kilometre) contract, under which fleet tyres are looked after by specialists employed by a tyre manufacturer or one of the well-known tyre, exhaust and battery fitting chains. It is likely to be more of a concern, however, for operators who purchase their tyres on a pay-as-you-go basis and rely on their workshop technicians to check the tyres, along with everything else.

Such businesses could benefit from, for example, the tyre management module recently added to VMS (Vehicle Maintenance System) workshop management software, from Distinctive Systems. This allows tread depths and pressure readings for each tyre to be recorded, along with its history, and predicts when it's likely to require replacement.

In fact, as a general point, anybody seeking to

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