

BROWN

BERTHA

Does Renault's T series, the long-haul truck that sits atop its new range, offer fleet managers as much as other newcomers? Ian Norwell talks to the French firm and test drives a pair of the tractors

Keeping a group's European truck brands separate and preserving their respective customer bases requires a delicate balancing act. Too similar and you'll be accused of badge engineering; too different and you're not taking advantage of the potential for economies of scale.

At the launch of Renault's new truck range in Lyon, last June, the balance was made clear by Volvo Group CEO Olof Persson. "This is one of the largest investments that the Volvo Group has ever made and it underscores the importance of Renault Trucks in our five-brand global strategy," he said. But the differentiation cost Persson a cool €2 billion.

Fast forward today, and Thierry Hours, Renault Trucks vice president with responsibility for the new line-up, says of the outgoing trucks: "We had a bits-and-pieces range that was in need of a new identity." Hence the importance of the Volvo Group cash and its technology. So how far did Hours go? Essentially, it was a 'yes' to the base engine components and adapted versions of Volvo Group's automated transmissions, but 'no' to the cab for the new T range long-haul truck, the flag-waver for the brand. That, says Hours, had to be a bespoke item eschewing even the foundations of Volvo's FH.

"It was important that the signature of the truck should be as distinctive as possible," he explains. With a new cab being one of the major expenses for any new truck, it was a bold move. But he adds: "We needed to look very carefully at what should be shared and what should not." Elsewhere in the range, however – at lower weights where presumably sharing identities is deemed less important – there is a sharing of cab structures between Volvo, Renault and DAF.

So the T series truck has its own cab. But it does not have independent front suspension, predictive cruise control, a 16-litre engine or dynamic steering. "The T range concentrates on functionality," reasons Hours – hinting that the Volvo FH will be the truck that serves

customers wanting that kind of extra specification.

However, when it comes to the wallet-emptying driveline, Hours was determined to harness AMTs as standard, with no option of a manual box. It is in engineering aspects like this that group economies work, with the OptiDriver robotised gearbox taking many of the internals from Volvo's I-Shift. And when it comes to multi-wheelers in the K-series, the absence of a manual box will not be the risky sale that it would have been only a few short years ago. Such is the sophistication of shifting programmes that they have now wrested the gear stick even from this last bastion of cog-crunchers.

Aerodynamics

That said, there seems to be no corporate answer to the question: 'What is the right path for cab aerodynamics?'. Volvo and Renault have different approaches and both, it seems, are right. A vital element in controlling operational costs is the slippery shape of the cab. Renault's T series solves this with a trapezoidal shaped cab, which is more apparent from the rear than the front. Its 2.5m wide base reduces to 2.3m at the cab's roof, which produced good figures in the wind tunnel – and thus, it is hoped, on the highway. Meanwhile, the eternal struggle on windscreen angle – a slippery shape, or space for the driver – has been resolved by a



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compromise of 12 degrees, which pays no compliment to the slab-fronted Magnum it replaces. Detailing looks good throughout, though – for example, sidelights moulded as air spoilers performing dual functions.

A telematics package is also now inescapable, but with the system pre-installed, it remains a cost-option. However, if fleet managers are determined not to specify anything that can't be measured, they should still be happy with Renault's OptiFleet system. Performance data for fleet managers and the driver training elements of the OptiFuel programme alone will surely pay for themselves, if they're fully exploited.

EGR-Lite

With Iveco the now well-known exception, truck manufacturers are using a mix of SCR (selective catalytic reduction) and EGR (exhaust gas recirculation) to restrict their engine emissions to Euro 6 limits. As the technologies come into sharper focus, it's clear that EGR is being used essentially only as a necessary evil. Renault's take on the process is what UK commercial director Nigel Butler calls 'EGR-Lite'. "It is most certainly not cooled EGR. We use a small amount of EGR during the engine's warm-up phase, and then it is switched off when operating temperature is reached," he explains.

This technique makes the process look more similar to Iveco's SCR-only. Indeed, many industry watchers feel that EGR will only be around until further refinements of SCR arrive. The penalty, however, is higher AbBlue consumption, which needs keeping an eye on, as it will represent a cost, certainly to larger fleets. Renault's rule-of-thumb is easy. The firm says consumption was 4% at Euro 4, 5% at Euro 5 and will be 6% at Euro 6.

That may improve, though. Improvements in dosing technology are not only squeezing out EGR, but may also progressively cut the AdBlue rate. Fleets I have spoken to also expect manufacturers' quoted rates to err on the side of caution, believing they will turn out lower in service. As ever, duty cycles throw in an additional variable here. **TE**

Driving experience

The importance of retaining drivers, particularly those that are being trained like never before (at considerable cost), is no longer in doubt. Giving them a comfortable workplace, and the education to make the best use of it, has crept closer to the top of the fleet agenda.

Many managers might say the driver's job is now easier, but they may be mistaking the muscular for the cerebral. From an acuity standpoint, the job has been progressively up-skilled in recent years. A driver now needs to be able to grasp the subtleties of automated transmissions, retarders, cruise controls (and their adaptive and predictive variants) – and not just be able to consistently place his or her truck on the road to within an inch or two.

Renault Trucks vice president Thierry Hours says he had three objectives in steering the new cabs' development: reliability, efficiency and comfort. The first two are necessarily puddings awaiting later proof, but the comfort goal seems to have been achieved. Interiors are certainly a big upgrade on the models Renault's T series replaces.

I drove a pair of T tractors from Renault's Blainville-sur-Orne factory in northern France, down to Normandy's Arromanches Gold beach. Both were 520bhp, 13-litre 4x2 tractor-trailers, loaded to 35 tonnes. One was the flat floor high sleeper, the other a regular sleeper with a conventional engine tunnel. The high sleeper option is not scheduled for RHD, but drivers will not feel short-changed by its exclusion.

The regular sleeper provides for over 6'2" of standing room and more than adequate storage. The OptiDriver 12-speed automated box is standard and most of the functions that have recently emerged on other marques are there. Adaptive cruise control has three distance settings, rather than being infinitely variable, and Opti-Roll is Renault's take on Volvo's 'I-Roll' coasting function – or other manufacturers' 'Eco-Roll'.

Importantly, the drive gives a feeling of control in all situations and the ability to retard progress without going for the brake pedal. It is also good to see 'soft' resume supplant its more aggressive and wasteful predecessor. If the T range is anything to go by, the company has certainly produced a better truck.

