

Equipment and materials for body shops and paint shops don't come cheap – and neither does compliance, with the likes of PAS 125. But getting damaged vehicles back on the road fast and fully functioning is what matters, says Steve Banner



# Faster, better,

**W**ater-based paint has yet to be embraced by most heavy truck accident repair shops, despite its environmental credentials. "Painting a truck or a trailer is as much about providing it with a defence against the elements as it is about aesthetics," explains Fran Johnson, bodyshop manager at Market Weighton, East Yorkshire-based Britcom International.

"As a consequence, we're still sticking with two-pack epoxy primers and a two-pack solvent-based top coat. We don't believe that water-based provides the protection that operators are looking for." The exception is if the customer wants a metallic finish. "Then we may use a water-based base coat, but the lacquer that is then applied will still be solvent-based," he observes.

The fact is that trucks and trailers may, of course, be double- or triple-shifted, seven days a week. So, as a consequence, they are constantly exposed to the battering dished out by the UK's variable climate. Cars and light commercials are not worked as hard, the argument goes, which has perhaps made it easier for repairers that specialise in refinishing them to switch to water-based products.

Glyn Heathcock, managing director of Oswestry, Shropshire bodyshop and Renault Truck dealership Perrys of Gobowen, believes, however, that there is nothing wrong with the durability of car paint finishes these days. The quality of paint found on run-of-the-mill volume cars is just as good as that seen on top-of-the-range executive models, he insists. "The additional cost of water-based has to be a concern, though, and it doesn't give you the sort of coverage you get with traditional paints," he agrees.

A key reason for the change to water-based,

where it has occurred, is rising concern over harmful solvent emissions. So truck bodyshops and the paint makers that supply them are having to find alternatives. "As a consequence, we have seen over the years a move to high-solid and, more recently, to extra-high solid paints, which have a lower solvent content," states Johnson.

This development has been accompanied by the use of high-volume, low-pressure spray guns, which result in a higher percentage of the paint reaching the vehicle's surface. That means less material has to be used and the emissions produced by the process are hence reduced. "Something else we're doing is using air-assisted, airless spray guns," says Johnson. Employing a combination of air and fluid pressure, these atomise the paint at a far thicker viscosity than older established spraying systems, which again leads to a fall in emissions.

## Not so easy

Changes to spraying equipment and the use of extra-high solid paints promise that some jobs might also be completed slightly more quickly, he observes. "That may be the case, if you are painting a slab-sided vehicle – a bus, say – but it is not necessarily true if you are spraying the cross-members on a trailer chassis," he comments.

And Bus & Coach World chairman Phillip Hilton also points out that execution of the painting task isn't the biggest thief of time. "Remember that it is preparation – rubbing a vehicle down and masking it up – that takes the time," he observes. Though best-known for its work on passenger vehicles, the Blackburn-based firm has recently started refurbishing and repainting trucks, too.

That said, anything that reduces the volume of

paint used has to be counted as a positive step, given its escalating price. "It is rising faster than labour costs, that's for sure," says Johnson. "We've just seen an 8.8% increase, following a similar rise less than 12 months ago." And Heathcock agrees: "We're certainly seeing annual rises of 5%," he says.

One way operators can hold down costs is by using recycled parts where possible – and that is as true for major fleets as it is for one-man bands. "It is something insurers are looking at closely, too," observes Heathcock. "Fit a recycled cab, rather than a new one, and you can save thousands of pounds."

Furthermore, that recycled cab will be sitting in a

# cleaner



Britcom's Johnson. "We've only been really stuck on one occasion and that was with a bus that had been in a major front-end collision. We couldn't get it to move once we'd repaired it, so we ended up calling one of the manufacturer's engineers for help. It turned out to be a broken wire we hadn't spotted."

Connections with a manufacturer clearly help, and Britcom has close links with MAN, while Perrys is a Mercedes-Benz-approved repairer, as well as holding the Renault franchise.

Meanwhile, what of the PAS 125 damage repair standard, which these days embraces commercial vehicles grossing at up to 5 tonnes? There seems little appetite in the repair industry to see it include trucks. Why? While it ensures that repairers have the right equipment and properly-trained staff – who ensure that everything done to a vehicle is traceable – it involves additional costs, points out the Vehicle Builders and Repairers Association (VBRA).

Those costs would doubtless be passed on to the customer, although some truck operators may

## Impact of Driver CPC?

Winner of 2012's Commercial Vehicle Bodyshop of the Year award – a prize it also won in 2006 and 2008, and eight times a finalist – the reputation Perrys of Gobowen enjoys means it has been busy for the past 12 months. That's despite the mild summer. Managing director Glyn Heathcock nonetheless believes that many fleets UK-wide are seeing a fall in the number of accidents that befall their trucks.

Partly, this may be due to the increased use of automatic boxes, which allow drivers to concentrate more fully on the road ahead, rather than worrying about which gear they are in, he suggests. Partly, it may also be due to more effective braking systems.

"I'm starting to wonder, though, whether it might be the result of the Driver CPC [Certificate of Professional Competence]," he muses. Though much-maligned, if the training prompts drivers to think before they act, then it could bring the transport industry some benefits at long last.

dealer parts department somewhere and so instantly available. "You may have to wait eight weeks for a new one, because it will have to be ordered," Heathcock remarks. "That's a long time for a truck to be off the road." And in fact, Perrys has started keeping a new tractor cab in stock, with the needs of its fleet customers in mind. "We're able to do that with a reasonable degree of confidence, because we know exactly what they run," he explains.

However, one of the biggest challenges bodyshops face is not painting, straightening chassis or replacing panels, but ensuring that the vehicle's electrical system – which may have sustained damage in a smash – is repaired correctly and works properly before it goes back on the road.

"Fortunately, we have technicians who are skilled in that area and we have the necessary equipment to diagnose faults on most makes of truck," says

take the view that the benefits PAS 125 brings could be worth paying for. The VBRA does not deny that PAS 125 has raised standards among car and light commercial bodyshops. However, it also points out that the one thing the standard does not do – perhaps surprisingly – is assess the quality of the repair itself, which is the main issue that matters.

Expanding the role of the Workshop Accreditation scheme, promoted by the IRTE (Institute of Road Transport Engineers), to embrace bodyshops could be another route to improving standards. It has been discussed on a number of occasions, says Ian Chisholm, head of operations and communications at the Society of Operations Engineers. "There is, however, a question as to whether such a move would generate sufficient support: and there is the cost to be borne in mind," he comments. **TE**

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