INFORMATION

Most professional fleet engineers now understand the value of good telematics, but have you got the right formula, or are you breaking a butterfly on a wheel? Ian Norwell goes data mining

A telematics system should perhaps be rated not for what it tells you, but for what it omits. Why? Because a full-fat truck telematics package can deliver vast amounts of data, yet still miss the information nuggets. This observation, born of experience, suggests that thinking about what you need upfront is going to pay long-term dividends.

What's the issue? You may think that you are managing a plain vanilla logistics operation, but there are flavours in every fleet that need special scrutiny. After all, your contracts, vehicle mix, drivers and geography are unique. So it's about detail.

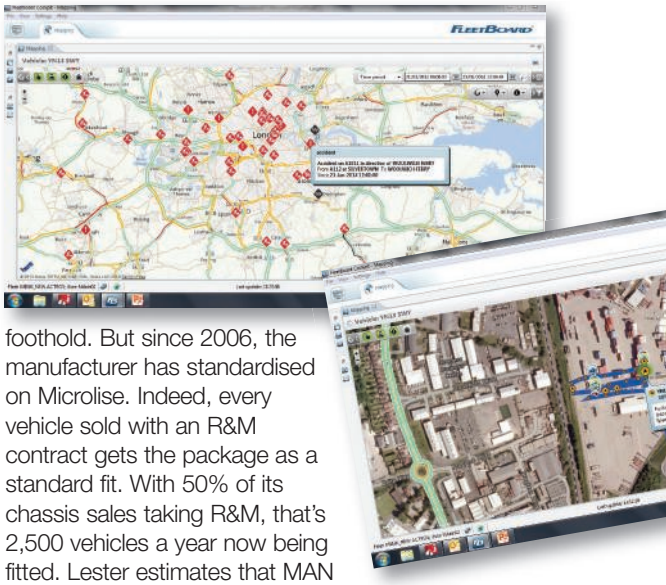
Truck manufacturers currently peddle one of three strategies. First, market-leading DAF doesn't offer its own telematics, nor a preferred supplier. Instead, UK marketing manager Phil Moon suggests that 'user chooser' is the way to go. "Customers should select a supplier that meets their specific needs." Sounds virtuous, but word is that DAF may be about to follow the market and appoint a provider. We'll soon see.

Next are the likes of MAN and Iveco, which also don't offer embedded telematics systems, but do have preferred suppliers. In both cases, it's Microlise. Then, third, we find players such as Mercedes-Benz FleetBoard, Renault OptiFleet and Volvo Dynafleet, all of which are in-house-developed systems catering primarily for their own vehicles.

Whatever the make-up of your fleet, when you analyse what might be best, those infuriating swings and roundabouts appear. Mercedes-Benz's FleetBoard, for example, can certainly cope with multi-brand fleets, but the data from non-Mercedes chassis is bound to be less sophisticated. However, before you turn away, ask yourself, does that matter?

Whatever you do, the key to extracting value is spending time upfront. According to David Lester, head of fleet management at MAN Truck & Bus UK, failure to do so is where fleets fall down. "The benefits will always be commensurate with the time and care put in to get the system right at the outset," he says.

MAN had early dalliances with small telematics suppliers, when the technology was just getting a foothold. But since 2006, the manufacturer has standardised on Microlise. Indeed, every vehicle sold with an R&M contract gets the package as a standard fit. With 50% of its chassis sales taking R&M, that's 2,500 vehicles a year now being fitted. Lester estimates that MAN currently has 8,000 in operation.



However, telematics is not just for large tractor fleets. Light truck distribution operators would be making a mistake if they ignored it, argues Lester. "Since driver performance is a key element, light rigids on busy multi-drop work will have even more to gain from telematics, as the driving environment offers a lot more action."

Fair point. Incidentally, MAN currently fits the Microlise equipment at PDI (pre-delivery inspection) in the UK. Compared to an on-line fit, this might mean compromises, but Lester says the firm is working towards installation on the production line in Munich.

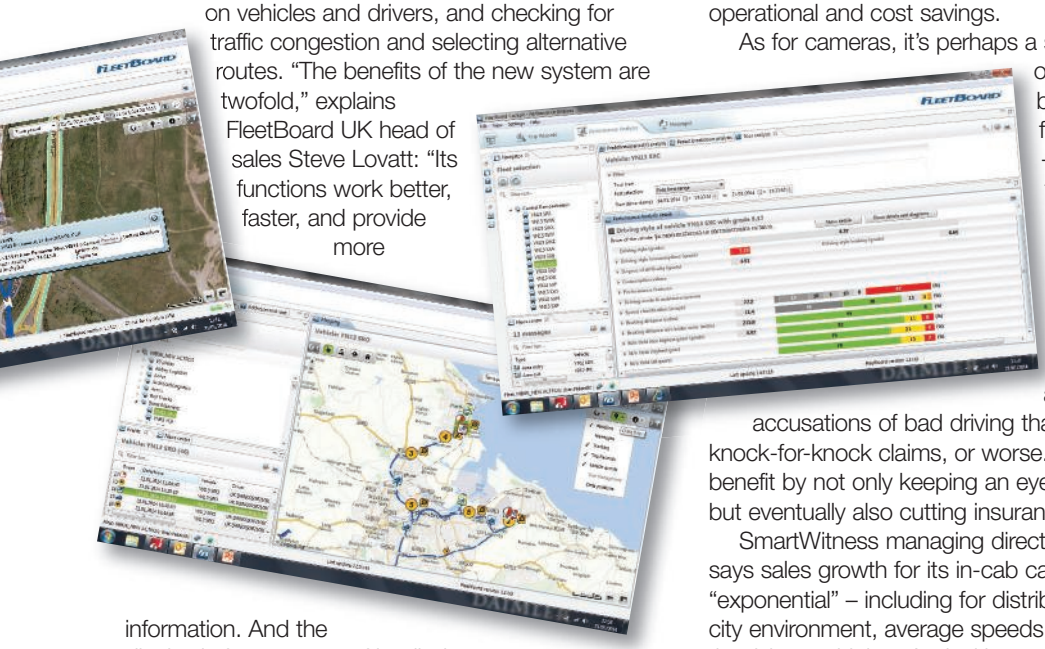
Use it or lose it

Meanwhile, Mercedes-Benz deemed it cheaper to install FleetBoard telematics hardware into every Actros chassis, rather than make it an additional spec item. As the then head of Mercedes-Benz trucks Hubertus Troska put it: "It makes better sense to build a telematics system into the truck's architecture and let customers see the benefits."

How? The strategy was to let fleets use telematics free of charge for four months and then hope they chose to continue for a monthly fee. This is still the case with Actros – and it works. Daimler reports a 62% take-up of FleetBoard. However, a simple pre-wiring loom is now fitted to all other major Mercedes-Benz commercial vehicle ranges so that a header unit can be quickly installed, if a fleet requests it.

OVERLOAD

And there are now more goodies. A system overhaul, dubbed FleetBoard Cockpit, now gives traffic planners the ability to track vehicles on-screen in real time, seeing position, speed and direction of travel. This is in addition to viewing performance data on vehicles and drivers, and checking for traffic congestion and selecting alternative routes. "The benefits of the new system are twofold," explains FleetBoard UK head of sales Steve Lovatt: "Its functions work better, faster, and provide more information. And the display is far more user friendly, because everything can be viewed in one place."



Maximising value

So much for the systems. What should you look for, in terms of information? The top four data streams fleets use are: driver and vehicle performance; track and trace; camera inputs; and journey management. No surprises there. The performance of truck and driver are clearly core to any fleet focused on cost reduction – not least because a faulty vehicle or a driver needing more training will haemorrhage cash.

This needn't be a problem. Fleet operators and truck manufacturers alike report that any early driver resistance to heightened levels of scrutiny has given way to an understanding that new levels of trust may come with this accountability. Before telematics, assessing a good driver was an inexact science: now it's down to hard data.

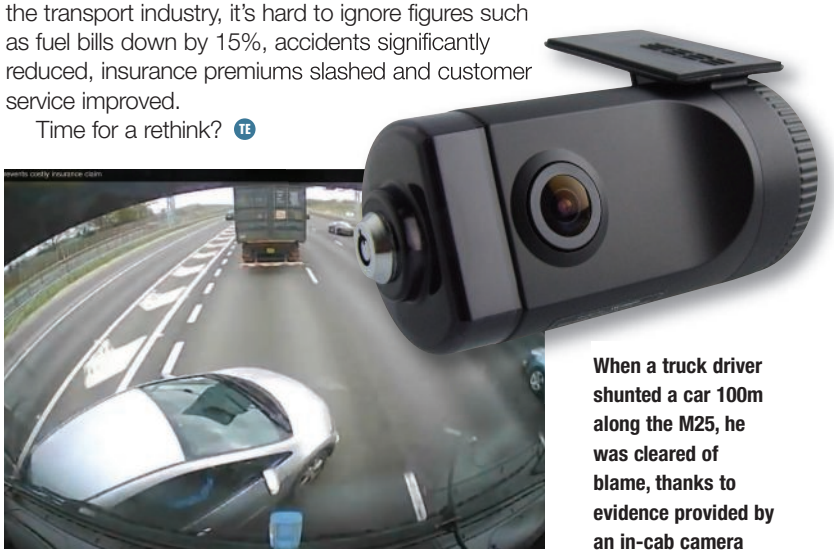
Take note, though. After nearly drowning in data, Rob Stubbs, group fleet director at Veolia Environmental Services, says his team decided to monitor only over-revving, idling and speeding to manage a fleet of more than 3,500 vehicles over 18 tonnes. "When we weren't getting the results we wanted, we could have easily walked away. That would have been a big mistake," he recalls – adding that the revised system has since delivered significant operational and cost savings.

As for cameras, it's perhaps a sad observation on our litigious society, but these are now flying off the shelves – and not all of them are forward-facing. Drivers have been quick to realise that this equipment can defend them against spurious and more sinister accusations of bad driving that lead to expensive knock-for-knock claims, or worse. Fleets can also benefit by not only keeping an eye on driver activity, but eventually also cutting insurance bills.

SmartWitness managing director Simon Marsh says sales growth for its in-cab cameras has been "exponential" – including for distribution fleets. "In a city environment, average speeds might be lower but the risks are higher. And with prominent liveries, companies' vehicles can now be ruthlessly outed, using social media, within minutes of an incident."

So, for any remaining telematics-deniers across the transport industry, it's hard to ignore figures such as fuel bills down by 15%, accidents significantly reduced, insurance premiums slashed and customer service improved.

Time for a rethink? TE



When a truck driver shunted a car 100m along the M25, he was cleared of blame, thanks to evidence provided by an in-cab camera

Telematics data can quickly become overwhelming. Best advice is to focus upfront on business requirements