

Choosing the best vans for your operation is about taking a structured approach that considers the detailed duty and total cost of ownership, says Steve Banner

Choice is a blessing, but too much can quickly turn into a curse. It is a curse that van fleet managers need to break, however, if they are to optimise their van selections, because manufacturers today offer a bewildering array of variants. There are 8,000 factory-built versions of the latest Iveco Daily alone.

Turning that choice to your advantage pays dividends. It may, for example, prompt purchasers to conclude that the big-capacity 5.0m³ versions of Vauxhall's Combo and Fiat's Doblo Cargo make more sense than a fully-fledged panel van. Though a perfectly valid choice if you need more cargo space and payload capacity than Combo/Doblo Cargo can offer, the panel van is likely to be more expensive and thirstier – and might well be under-utilised.

"There's certainly a trend in favour of downsizing," says Jon Lawes, managing director of Hitachi Capital Commercial Vehicle Services (HCVS). "It may mean you can save £1,000–£2,000 on the acquisition price,



Light challenge

as well as reducing CO₂ output and fuel bills."

Be that as it may, any decision over light commercials has to be underpinned by analysing intended uses. How bulky and how heavy are items drivers have to carry? How wide and how tall? How easy will it be to manoeuvre them through the van's doors? Are items loaded on pallets? If so, can a pallet be slid through the door apertures and, if loaded from the rear, also between the rear wheel boxes? If the van is to be pallet-loaded from the back, twin doors that swing through at least 180° may be your only option. When a hatch-type door is open, it may foul a forklift's masts.

Next, what's the longest item a driver is likely to carry? Remember some vans – Ford's new Transit Courier for instance – allow the passenger seat to be folded flat and the mesh bulkhead behind it to be swung across and latched next to the driver. Doing so extends the load bed while also ensuring that whatever is placed on the temporary extension does

not topple into the driver's lap. The only drawback is that it puts the passenger seat out of action.

Another approach to accommodating extra-long items (other than fitting a roof rack, which can increase your fuel consumption by 2–3 mpg, thanks to the drag) is to specify a girafon. Favoured by French manufacturers, and available on light vans such as Renault's recently-revised Kangoo, it is a roof-mounted flap close to the van's back doors through which over-length items can be inserted.

"In all of this, you also have to think about where drivers are going to take their vehicles," advises Tony Grove, light commercial vehicle manager at contract hire and fleet management specialist Arval. "If they need to enter multi-storey car parks, you don't want to give them something that's too tall to get under the height barrier."

Choosing the right engine power output is important, too, with 125bhp perfectly adequate for a 3.5-tonner, if you are on city centre delivery work with



enhanced if you specify one or two items you may not require but the market likes, says Grove. "These include air conditioning and metallic paint," he observes, adding that height-adjustable drivers' seats and reversing sensors make a difference. "Second-hand buyers like them and your own bills for bodywork damage will fall," he says.

Ford's Transit Connect: tough, reliable, flexible and proven by extreme testing

What about non diesels? Interest in alternative modes of propulsion is rising, with British Gas ordering 100 electric Nissan e-NV200 vans this year for its service engineers. HCVS is funding their acquisition as well as managing the battery-powered fleet on the company's behalf. For British Gas, this is about its commitment to ensuring that 10% of its 13,000 home service vans are electric by 2017.

Of course, many operators and owners who might otherwise consider going electric suffer from range anxiety – the fear that the batteries will be fully depleted halfway through a delivery. For them, plug-in

regular forays into the suburbs, and 150bhp making sense if you also engage in high-speed intercity dashes or haul a heavy trailer.

But vehicles from various manufacturers may tick all those boxes, so which do you pick? "That's where you need to look at the total cost of ownership, taking into account purchase price, residual value, fuel consumption and maintenance expenditure," states Lawes. Several specialists – HCVS included – offer to run the analysis for you and come up with a pence-per-mile figure. That number is likely to be projected over a longer period than pre-recession. During the economic downturn many operators kept their vans for longer and discovered they remained perfectly reliable if they were maintained.

Aftersales and residuals

"We've seen a shift from three years even up to five. So when we're considering van residuals these days, we typically look at what the vehicle will be worth after four years or 80,000 miles," explains Ryan Long, head of light commercials at Zenith, which provides leasing and fleet management packages.

As for other refinements of your search, another aspect to consider is structural strength. Construction crews will give vans a somewhat tougher time than florists. "If we're looking at an arduous application, we'd probably advise the fleet concerned to opt for a Mercedes or a Ford," suggests Long.

And then there's the ability of dealers to provide aftersales support. "Manufacturers with fully-fledged commercial vehicle dealerships – such as Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen and Iveco – are preferable to those that sell vans on the back of a car dealer network," advises one executive. "Car dealers find it difficult to grasp concepts such as downtime and getting vans out of workshops and back to work."

Another point: residual values are likely to be



hybrids are likely to make more sense – although no van maker offers a production option at present.

Gaseous fuels still attract some support, with Iveco continuing to bang the CNG (compressed natural gas) drum and offering a variant of new Daily, despite CNG's limited availability here.

Some may feel that today's low CO₂ mainstream diesel vans represent a more viable route to environmental virtue. Many now feature stop/start, regenerative braking, low rolling resistance tyres and minor aerodynamic changes. And those concerned about diesel particulate emissions – city councils, for instance – may wish to revisit petrol. That is something Ford is banking on with the introduction of the 1.0-litre EcoBoost engine in the latest Transit Connect and the Transit Courier.

Anything with a petrol engine may suffer in the second-hand market, however. People who buy used vans tend to be traditionalists. Nobody ever got shot for buying a diesel. **TE**

British Gas has ordered 100 Nissan e-NV200 electric vans – but, for most, hybrids may make more sense