



With the perceived disparities between OE and aftermarket parts, and claims and counter-claims, Brian Tinham seeks guidance for busy fleet managers and their buyers

Shoppers know there are risks but also rewards in going off-piste. Perversely, the thrill comes from both: that's why so many do it. But, while going off-piste by purchasing non-OE (original equipment) spares also entails risks and rewards, the thrill only comes from the latter. Yes, you might save short-term cash but, no, risking downtime (at the roadside or in the workshop) and even accidents, due to premature failures, is no fun at all. Indeed, it can be very costly – both financially and in terms of your reputation with customers and DVSA.

That is essentially the argument promulgated by OEMs and their OE suppliers to keep you in the fold. And it stands to reason – until your operation's margins are tight, or the defect report in front of you is for an older vehicle you only intend to keep for a few months. Then, despite the OEMs' anecdotal evidence, saving money looks quite attractive.

So let's do some myth busting. Few doubt that parts available to the aftermarket from OE suppliers may be identical to those delivered to OEMs for assembly and offered by their dealer networks under genuine parts programmes – with the exception of branding. But what about those reverse engineered by a third party or sourced by an aftermarket supplier – perhaps from the same subcontractor that supplies the OE supplier?

The answer is, it's all about the detail of design engineering, materials, construction, production methods, and, of course, the quality of copy parts – and their fit. It's also ultimately about their short- and long-term performance, which is established by manufacturers' testing regimes, or lack of them. But in the vast majority of cases, it is difficult for buyers, much less technicians, to detect differences simply by looking at them. Yes, there are standards, such as ECE R90 for braking systems, but even these only establish minimum requirements – taking no account of heavy fade, judder and noise. So, unless you or someone you trust carries out due diligence, it's a gamble.

Legal landscape

Unfortunately, the legal landscape doesn't help much. Thomas Funke, a German automotive legal expert with international law firm Osborne Clarke, explains that EU law regards 'original spare parts' as "any parts manufactured in accordance with vehicle makers' technical specifications and standards – not the distribution channel". So far, so good: that simply enshrines in law the obvious, that OEM parts are equivalent to those made for them by OE suppliers.

However, block exemption and type approval legislation allow another category – parts of matching quality – meaning those not produced in accordance with manufacturers' specifications, provided functionality, durability and fit are not compromised. That's before we get to the third type: those making no claims, or, worse, fraudulent claims. And note that you won't find OEMs rushing to rubbish alternative suppliers. Following adverse rulings in the courts some years ago, where some tried denouncing competitive products, it's not going to happen – unless they can



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build solid evidence of a risk to roadworthiness.

One way of getting around the difficulty might be to use trading groups such as Groupauto. According to Martin Sangster, commercial manager for CVs, this company has created a product tendering process that requires wannabe approved suppliers to submit assurances around the quality and suitability of their products. As a result, workshops using Groupauto motor factors, including G-Truck CV factors, get some kind of due diligence guarantee.

It's a difficult one, though. Neil Bailey, business development manager for commercial vehicles at Schaeffler Automotive Aftermarket (UK), reckons that it's not difficult to find copies of safety-critical items, such as its OE FAG hub RIUs (repair insert units). “At first sight they look similar and appear to use the same technology, but they're just standard inserts... Recently, I found a motor factor selling four copy versions of our DAF FAG RIUs imported from Asia. They had no logo on the bearing, but were marked with an FAG reference.”

In this case, the RIUs were seized and destroyed. But note: they were inferior at every level, with, for example, open bearings on one side and loose seals. In service, they would quickly have become contaminated, leading inevitably to early failure.

Yes, that was extreme and you might imagine it's less likely with more complex components. Well not necessarily. Braking systems specialist Knorr-Bremse's training and service engineer Carl Dibble says calipers need to be watched. “Non-OEM and reconditioned calipers may be cheaper, but in our experience they're not as reliable, so [fitting them] is a false economy... Not to mention the problems incurred if calipers fail prematurely.”

ZF Services sales manager Martyn Houghton says he doesn't see many copies of his company's OE products, probably because of their sophistication. However, he warns of issues with steering, suspension and clutch systems. “One of the biggest is the materials third parties use, although there can also be problems with construction. Even a ball joint can have problems. Under the cap, ZF Lemförder units house a lot of technology, such as springs and cushioning. If you take an ‘equivalent’ unit apart, you may find it uses a different design and works differently... I'm not saying all non-OE parts are no good, but it's hard to differentiate and the only way to be sure is to buy OE.”

Here's another thought. Houghton makes the point that

today's truck manufacturers don't just approach Tier One suppliers like ZF and ask for shock absorbers. “They say we need the chassis and driveline designed to work together, with new tolerances, new weight saving, new calculations.”

So even fairly lowly parts aren't necessarily simple bolt-ons: they're engineered structures. Hence ZF's approach to workshop support. It's not simply about selling parts: it's helping technicians to understand failure modes, diagnose problems using root cause analysis and so drive repairs that last.

What do vehicle manufacturers say? MAN head of UK parts Karl-Heinz Meister believes that, in the end, operators need to think about uptime, reliability and safety – and remember that buying cheaper can entail spending more on technician hours when the fit is not quite right. He also warns that some parts suppliers offer two or more quality levels – including on their remanufactured and reconditioned lines. That's particularly the case around filtration and braking, and can result in frequent service changes as well as endangered vehicle warranties.

Talking of which, he adds: “We also offer worldwide warranty so, if parts are fitted in our workshops, you don't have to worry about anything wherever you are – it's all covered.” Whereas, if you don't, it's not and you do – and you won't benefit from updates either, as parts are revised over the vehicle lifetime.

Tellingly, he also points to the big fleets' approaches to spares, and their increasing preference for OE. “They measure total cost of ownership very accurately, right down to how many litres of oil, the frequency of changing filters, brake pads, etc, allocating all parts and labour to specific vehicles. As long as the price is right, they see the value of OE.”

He would say that, wouldn't he. But in the end, this boils down to: do you feel lucky? It's hard to avoid the conclusion that cheaper parts are cheap for a reason. That's fine if you're buying ‘genuine remanufactured’ parts from the likes of Knorr-Bremse, rebuilt at end of life to identical standards and quality, but offered with slightly reduced service life for older vehicles.

However, for the rest, TRW's commercial vehicles sales director James O'Gara puts it well: “Quality really does count when it comes to aftermarket parts that get the abuse HCV parts do. Fitting cheaper, lesser quality parts is a false economy. They won't last as long; they won't provide the level of safety; and they are likely to fail more often, requiring the vehicle to be off-road more frequently while they are exchanged.” ¹⁵



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