

## Fuel for Thought

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By: Paul T. Lauria, [Mercury Associates](#)

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**As summer arrives, gas prices are likely to keep rising. To keep a lid on fuel costs, try these smart strategies.**

One of the easiest ways to cope with soaring fuel costs is to simply drive less. This can be done without negatively affecting customer contacts or service levels, although options do vary depending on the type of business you're in and the ways in which you use vehicles to support your business. The key is to *plan* vehicle use to the fullest extent possible so as to avoid making multiple trips when a single one will do, and to avoid traveling during periods of peak traffic congestion when off-peak trips will suffice.

For sales reps and service technicians, this means trying to identify daily destinations in advance so that they can combine multiple customer calls without having to return to the office for down time between meetings or to the shop to retrieve needed supplies or repair parts. An alternative is to utilize one of the growing number of automated vehicle locating (AVL) systems to continuously monitor drivers' locations and dispatch them to new customer calls that come in during the day based on their proximity to those customers. For delivery vehicles, it means mapping out regular routes and times of travel that hit warehouse and common customer locations while steering clear of time-eating traffic bottlenecks and parking restrictions. For service firms, trip planning should consider that many forms of customer contact that have traditionally involved face-to-face meetings can also be accomplished effectively today using teleconferencing, instant messaging, and e-mail.

### **Maintain**

Fuel consumption is directly affected by vehicle condition and performance, which are strongly influenced by vehicle *maintenance* practices. There is little question that vehicles are being engineered and built better today than ever before, and many fleet owners are keeping vehicles in service longer as a result. Still, regular preventive maintenance (PM) will help maximize fuel efficiency, as well as increase vehicle reliability, safety, and residual value.

A good PM program begins with the recommended service activities and intervals published in - surprise - the owner's manual that comes with each new vehicle. However, fleet owners should also consult with the dealers from whom they buy or lease vehicles or with independent shops in order to tailor a program to their particular vehicle operating needs and practices. For instance, if you operate a fleet of delivery vehicles and the unexpected loss of a single truck due to a mechanical problem would seriously disrupt your business, you should have a very robust PM program which includes

frequent inspection and servicing of all critical vehicle systems and components. If you operate passenger vehicles that are used solely to transport employees to and from meetings, however, you can afford to be less rigorous in your approach to vehicle maintenance for the simple reason that there are more alternatives to turn to if one of these vehicles breaks down: a rental car, a personal vehicle, a taxi, etc.

### **Train and Instruct**

Better drivers and better driving techniques can really have an impact on fuel costs. Since operating and maintenance practices lie at the heart of controlling vehicle fuel efficiency, training programs and formal vehicle operation policies and procedures should be key components of a fuel cost - and overall fleet cost - containment strategy. Behind-the-wheel techniques that promote both fuel efficiency and vehicle safety include avoiding "jack rabbit" starts and stops; monitoring traffic flows and patterns by looking beyond the vehicle immediately in front of you; using cruise control to maintain constant speeds when highway conditions permit; and so forth. These and many other sound driving practices are covered in commercial drivers license (CDL) and driver safety training programs. However, employees should also be instructed in the principles of sound trip planning and vehicle maintenance. Since vehicles usually are in the physical possession of employees most of the time, they must understand their responsibilities when it comes to managing vehicle performance and costs.

These are just a few of the strategies you can use to cope with rising fuel costs - and control the overall performance and costs of your business vehicles. Fortunately, most things you should do to achieve the latter objective also can help you accomplish the former. We'll explore many other strategies in future columns.

***Paul Lauria is the president of [Mercury Associates, Inc.](http://MercuryAssociates.com), a fleet management consulting firm that works with fleets of all types and sizes. He can be reached at [plauria@mercury-assoc.com](mailto:plauria@mercury-assoc.com).***