

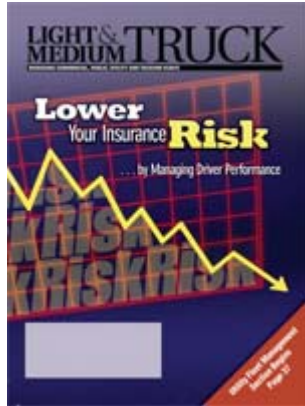
LIGHT & MEDIUM TRUCK

MANAGING COMMERCIAL, PUBLIC, UTILITY AND TELECOM FLEETS

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Guest Editorial: Team With Operations To Justify Tracking Technology

By Gary Hatfield



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Fleet managers have struggled for years to get the information they need and to determine how to use the information effectively.

Odometer readings, for example, are important for preventive maintenance management and vehicle utilization monitoring. But getting accurate and timely updates can be frustrating, because drivers often input incorrect numbers when they refuel.

New technologies on the market are designed to improve communication between vehicles and people, and many provide access to information about the vehicle while it is in use. This includes not only accurate odometer readings, but also such information as vehicle location, speed, idle time, onboard diagnostics fault codes and emission system condition.

Such technology raises business and management questions for fleet managers, such as:

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- Do we need one of these new systems?
- Which system will best meet my needs?
- What do I need to track?
- How can I use the information without being buried by data?
- How much will the system cost and where can I find the money to buy/operate it?

The types of systems available generally fall into one of three categories.

First are automated vehicle location and global positioning systems, which use a combination of satellite and/or cellular networks. Keep in mind, however, that they are not necessarily the same thing. A GPS system usually only receives location data, whereas an AVL system usually can both receive and transmit, meaning it can send information to an office computer.

Second are radio frequency identification devices. Vehicle use would require a sophisticated RFID that can collect and store data, such as odometer readings, which are then collected by a receiver (such as at a service center gate) each time the vehicle passes nearby. The data then goes from the receiver to a computer.

Third are the familiar automated fuel management systems. Most require driver input of odometer readings, but some use the fuel filler "ring" technology, which eliminates the potential for human error.

Let's assume that you want to acquire an AVL system because it

captures the most vehicle data and is the only solution that offers two-way communications among fleet supervisors, operations dispatchers and the vehicle/driver. AVL systems are considerably more costly than the other options. So how can you afford to do it?

Meet with operations managers and introduce the concept of AVL systems to help them cut costs and improve service. Those who are trying to increase service and repair crew productivity will likely be interested in a system that will help improve worker routing and scheduling. Collaborate with them to define both fleet management and operational needs. Explain the benefits of being able to reduce fuel costs through better routing and reduced idle time, as well as monitoring risky driver behavior such as speeding.

The business case for new fleet technology can often be made easier by operating departments than the fleet department. For example, the benefit of having an AVL system during a major service outage might justify its cost, and the fleet manager could get a free ride on the data train by getting the system funded by the operations folks.

Gary Hatfield, director of Public Fleet Consulting Services at Mercury Associates in Bradenton, Fla., has 32 years' experience in fleet management.

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