

## KEEPING YOUR WHEELS ON THE ROAD



## FLEET MANAGERS AND OWNERS HAVE TO MOVE WITH THE TIMES



THINK SMART: Ken Bailey, operations director at Compass Fleet Management

**CRUISE CONTROL:** Today's technology means companies that manage their own fleets have no excuse for not having their fleets performing optimally. Moreover, even small changes per vehicle can lead to big benefits and savings

# Get smart or get off the road

## Embrace the latest technology or be stranded by the wayside

### BRENDAN PEACOCK

**D**ETAILED monitoring and control of vehicle fleets is now possible, thanks to advanced automotive diagnostics systems. Some fleet owners and managers continue to avoid the initial outlay of such a system, but experts say those who fail to fully embrace technology will fall by the wayside under the present economic conditions.

"The advantages are obvious, especially for larger fleets, where even small changes per truck can bring large savings," said Ken Bailey, operations director at Compass Fleet Management.

"Many corporates are not in control of their routes and data — even fuel companies and hauliers. There is too much variation, spending, failure to check information and sometimes hiding or manipulation of information. Customers are not getting the

results they want if hauliers manipulate information. What I can't figure out is how hauliers who manipulate information are making a profit.

"Our clients can now bring their actual figures much closer to what's expected from their vehicles. The technology is not a silver bullet if it is not managed on a day-to-day basis, of course.

"It's a slow process, and many big corporates battle to trickle down effectiveness because it means a lot of extra work.

"It's a challenge but I think it's wrong to simply pass higher costs on to the customer. Those hauliers who have embraced technology have become more efficient, and can save by the percent through better decisions and 24-hour control," added Bailey.

"The most relevant advances in technology involve the CAN-bus (Controller Area Network bus), which allows micro-controllers, components and devices within

a vehicle to communicate for the purposes of diagnostics and reporting. Manufacturers allow access to a greater range of information, so the display can go beyond the norm," he said.

"For example, if accurate amounts of fuel issued and burned are tallied, a driver may be liable for any shortage. Fuel consumption has become provable and fluctuations can be explained."

Bailey added that other technology helping to cut costs can be found at home-based refuelling depots, where clients with browsers really need to know more about what is happening — particularly regarding authorisation for refuelling. Checking with actual readings and computer information is vital in pre-authorisation because the figures need to tally. This is particularly important with old trucks whose odometers may no longer be accurate.

"The best way is to remove the manual

capturing of information and get the vehicle to do it instead," said Bailey. "Navigational technology has come a long way and third-party integration can help greatly in providing feedback and instructions to drivers.

"In addition, drive-cams that record pictures of accidents and events in the cab are now emerging. For every impact, a history of information from immediately before, during and afterwards is stored. However, I think this is too reactive — it's important to be more proactive to prevent such events from happening.

"Even Mozzie Cabs in Durban has invested in live units for its 37 cars, and we have frequent consultations to ensure the most effective driving skills are put into place.

"This has brought some big savings and they can see the benefits of avoiding fuel wastage and using live tracking to see who is closest to the pick-up point. Driver training in the use of IT technology and applications

is essential," said Bailey. Mike Cox, general manager of Tramigo, said modern technology offered recorded data that can be harnessed in real time to tell drivers to act on the diagnostics.

"Driver efficiency is critical in eliminating truck abuse and minimising maintenance," he said.

"With a GPS receiver it's possible to achieve location accuracy within two metres. This can provide information about the state of the vehicle, idle time, speeding, location, as well as a range of other data. You can also build in significant landmarks to monitor route progress. All this information can be sent to a cellphone, or using Google maps through a browser," said Cox.

"Companies in Africa are generally well versed in looking after fleets because there is simply more to monitor here, given the harshness of our environment, large distances and the high risk of theft. The technology involved is already of a very high standard.

"The applications of the technology are also quite broad — an example of the in-



portance. There is a huge reliance on drivers to cut out indirect costs, so better tools to assist them are necessary. Crime is also driving the adoption of more effective tracking technology.

"In tracking and recovery from theft, South Africa leads the world market. In terms of fleet management services, we are on a par with the rest of the world. This is partly down to our circumstances — we are quite particular, not just in reducing costs, but in controlling drivers. Generally, in South Africa we do not deal with owner-drivers, so transporters need to protect their assets closely," Naude added.

Brendan Horan, general manager sales and marketing for MiX Telematics Africa, said in the current environment competition was based less on price and more on competitive service, technology and experience.

"This is where many smaller operators have fallen short," he said. "The best strategy is a strong partnership with the fleet operator or customer. This requires strong buy-in from the customer and a relationship that is a long-term partnership and not a standard customer-supplier relationship."

Shell Lubricants' marketing manager Nomusa Dlamini added that one of the least obvious yet most effective means of achieving greater efficiency was re-evaluating one's choice of lubricant.

"The knock-on effect of rising fuel prices has impacted transport businesses more than other industries, typically lowering overall profitability. Finding ways to reduce fuel usage without impacting business operations is thus a priority," he said.

"When one considers that, on average, 10% of fuel consumed by trucks is used to overcome mechanical friction, one soon realises that selection of the right lubricant provides a critical means of reducing both fuel consumption and wear and tear.

"While low-viscosity grade lubricants have inherently less friction and thus improve fuel efficiency, they can degrade quickly, losing their fuel economy and protection benefits. Our solution has been to develop synthetic low-viscosity oils. These save energy without compromising on oil life or engine protection," Dlamini added.

"They can reduce energy use by roughly 2%, producing significantly less carbon dioxide per truck per year. Across an entire fleet of trucks this can result in significant cost savings and reduced emissions."

novation being applied here is a push-bicycle rental company in Cape Town which has chosen to fit a R3 000-plus device to each bike.

"It is paying dividends because in the event of punctures or problems, the exact location of each bike can be monitored and communication does not require a foreign tourist to initiate a cellphone call via international roaming. Tourists are happy to pay for this service because the hassle has been removed," added Cox.

Andre Naude, sales and marketing manager for Skygistics, said South Africa has become the logistics hub for Africa. "There are simply many more trucks going up into the continent instead of staying within our borders.

"Although most fleets are still using GSM or GPRS technology for tracking and recording information, GPS systems, although more expensive, are definitely the way forward. GSM coverage can be patchy at best in Africa, while satellite communications are highly efficient and reliable," Naude explained.

"Fleet management is tremendously cost-sensitive. Companies are being forced to cut out all indirect costs, such as idleness, unnecessary braking and acceleration and tyre pressure — especially in outlying areas, where driver skill is of the utmost im-

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