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How well positioned are aftermarket businesses to deal with the changing reality of truck service?

How technology is changing fleet parts and service needs

I've been asking industry suppliers throughout the year about what they see as big-picture trends for the aftermarket. Data, connectivity, and technological advancements are among the things we've discussed.

More data and connectivity will allow fleets to better service and maintain their vehicles, but will also cause them to change their fleet management practices.

In addition, the pace of technological developments will play a key role in how prepared the aftermarket will be to service fleets. It begs the question: Who will be capable of providing the parts and technical solutions that will be required to service these more technologically advanced vehicles? In addition, these vehicles are likely to require higher levels of expertise to understand and service them properly.

That brings us squarely to dealer shops and independent distributors and repair garages — the places fleets take the vehicles to be serviced if they don't have their own shops or if the work is something they do not want to do in-house.

How well positioned are these businesses to deal with the changing reality of truck service?

Brent Penzkofer, vice president, aftermarket, North America, at Meritor, says fleets will be looking for greater uptime and lower total cost of ownership — and they will be looking to do business with parts and service providers “that can offer a good value proposition. Whether that is large independent distributors or distribution groups like Vipar and HDA TruckPride or the OEs themselves [remains to be seen]. But I think there will be changes in who provides the services and aftermarket parts in the future.”


He also expects to see further consolidation of independent distributors over the next five to 10 years. “A lot of the people who started these companies a number of years ago are approaching retirement age,” Penzkofer says. “As a result, business succession is going to be resolved one way or another. When that occurs, there are likely to be changes for some fleets regarding who provides the repair service or the aftermarket parts for their trucks and trailers.”

Pete Joy, global strategic advisor, Phillips Industries, also foresees more consolidation. “Regional independents will continue to be absorbed by national distributors like FleetPride, TruckPro, Napa, etc. This will impact one of the strong points of the regional independents, [which is] superior local service and technical support.”

Joy also believes there will be consolidation of the marketing groups. “Cookie-cutter or lowest-common-denominator parts outlets will result in a decline in service and a movement to quality on the part of the fleet.”

Larger fleets will intensify their focus on quality, Joy says, which means replacing a part with one from a brand in which they have confidence. And he believes they won't have confidence in automotive big-box store brands, regardless of price. “The fleet will be more likely to turn to dealers for replacement parts, particularly the first owners.”

However, Joy sees even bigger changes on the horizon: direct sales to fleets. “Dramatic changes in the distribution channel will force suppliers to reconsider their traditional model and consider a direct e-commerce solution,” Joy says. “It's not hard to figure out the impact of that on the evolution of distributors and dealers.”

Are Joy's predictions right? Time will tell. But it's undeniable that as products continue to become more sophisticated and complex, fleets are going to need technical advisors who can arm them with the product knowledge and support their maintenance and repair needs. Joy believes suppliers are best equipped to provide that, but dealers, distributors, and independent repair garages have a history of adapting to changing market conditions and customer needs. 

Denise Rondini offers information and insight to help fleet managers make smart parts and service choices. A highly respected freelance writer in the transportation industry, she has covered the aftermarket and dealer parts and service issues since 1982, and now covers those areas exclusively for Heavy Duty Trucking and Truckinginfo.com. She can be reached at drondini@truckinginfo.com or (773) 951-8563.