

A myriad of important factors must be understood and controlled for a vehicle fleet to stay within resource and budget parameters.

FLEET MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS

have traditionally operated within a cost control mind-set, offering companies the ability to optimise their operations and ensure costs are predictable and manageable.

In recent years however, the technology underpinning Fleet Management solutions has evolved to become a key point of competitive advantage. Think, for example, of the customer service challenge of online shopping. Leading online retailers not only deliver products to the customer's door, they do it with flair, style and a high degree of accuracy. The best in the business notify customers, via SMS and email, about every step in the delivery process, and every time they deliver on their promises, they leapfrog more sluggish rivals.

The global market is moving more towards keeping cost control in mind as reducing costs will always be a factor when it comes to fleet management, says Andre Ittmann, CEO, Cartrack South Africa. "Yes, there are incredible tools available to streamline logistics and control costs, but these are only half of a fast changing picture. Companies now use Fleet Management tools to boost driver performance and to engage in a powerful way with end customers. Viewed collectively, the tools offered by Fleet Management systems can play a big role in redefining the position of a brand in the market."

At the core logistics level, a Fleet Management system offers a dashboard overview of the key performance aspects of every vehicle. Delivery progress can be plotted against the desired schedule, and it's possible to view many real time details, such as the location of a particular vehicle, how many kilometres it has covered, what its immediate movements are and the speed it is travelling at.

"This is very important information," says Ittmann. "The raw data can be used, for example, to monitor and proactively develop driver performance. When the company knows how fast drivers are accelerating and how they work the brakes, they can control vital wear and tear costs, such as fuel consumption and tyre usage. They can also work with their drivers to improve performance and safety on the road, which again, is a key tool in managing a vehicle fleet."

An important factor in the increasing strategic relevance of Fleet Management software to businesses is ease of use. Cartrack's software for example, offers a dashboard lens to customers via a variety of interfaces, from a standard computer browser to a dynamic mobile phone app. The system can be managed by any relevant staff member, no matter where they are in the world.

"Say, for example, a theft has occurred, the vehicle can be tracked in real time, including when it crosses international borders. Immediate access to such data is a vital tool in an emergency situation. Equally, the system allows for detailed recreations of accidents and emergency events, if you choose to add on a camera in the vehicle. In complex legal scenarios, this is a wonderful asset," adds Ittmann.

In terms of administration, users can access the

logbooks at the touch of a button, while full client reports are always available for download, including data on key variables such as E-Tolls. Crucially, packages can be customised to meet the client's specific requirements.

Customisation also plays a significant role in enabling broad competitive advantage. For some companies safety on the road is a key aspect of the competitive environment. For others, real time communication with customers is the challenge, while others will focus on the secure delivery of fragile items. Regardless, a strong Fleet Management system can be tailored to hone in on the most important areas.

"The feedback we get from clients of all sizes is that they got active with Fleet Management initially to reduce costs and make sure their fleet is as productive as possible," says Ittmann. "Ultimately, a lot these companies have now ended up using the data flow to outperform competitors."

In the online shopping environment for example, companies can use the tracking information to send an SMS to the delivery recipient as the vehicle turns into their street, or office park. This kind of up-to-the-second service clearly differentiates market leaders from the rest of the pack.

Ittmann goes on to explain that fleet management tools are spreading beyond the context of the large organisations to be increasingly used by small

operations, differently structured fleets and single users. "Drive Vision, which is a Cartrack exclusive offering for example, comprises a primary camera that records video footage with a 120-degree exterior view of the road ahead, plus a secondary driver camera that provides a 160-degree view of the inside of the vehicle cab. Audio is also available. The camera system has a built-in movement sensor, which records events such as speeding, harsh braking, sharp turning and severe acceleration. These are useful to smaller fleet owners as good driver behaviour is crucial to their business' bottom line", he says.

"At Cartrack, we have an offering for bikes called Bike Track," he says. One of the features includes a specially designed power management system to avoid discharging the bike battery. The solution provides for exception and alert reporting, plus comprehensive trip and rider behaviour analyses," says Ittmann.

This does not mean the competitive advantage on offer will be short lived. "Smart companies will partner with fleet management specialists to align what is possible in technology terms with their strategic intent. The companies that get this right will gain significant advantage over less able rivals every time. The details of the technology may change, but the competitive advantage possibilities will be very powerful for those willing and able to think beyond what fleet management used to entail in the past." <<

