



Users demand more



Lift truck operators are looking for more than ever before from both their equipment and their suppliers, according to a recent survey of European fleet managers.



Guy Washer of Redshift Research, the firm which carried out the survey, highlights the key trends.

A study of over 1,400 users of lift trucks in five different European countries recently has revealed a market that is becoming ever more demanding.

The trend appears to lend weight to the argument that the materials handling market follows patterns established in the automotive sector. We simply don't expect our cars to break down any more – so we tend to make purchasing decisions based on other criteria like image, brand, performance, finance, safety, service and extras.

Naturally, not all of these apply to the purchase of a forklift truck – the image of a vehicle, for example, is probably far less important to lift truck operators than to car purchasers – but in addition to an ever-increasing focus on service levels, there is real evidence that people are becoming more concerned with both safety and the environment.

Of these, safety is the better defined, with users particularly concerned about such areas as operator visibility, noise levels and stability. Environmental performance is, however, also becoming a big issue, particularly with larger firms.

Mixed messages

While the importance of environmental issues appears to be increasing, however, there are contradictions between what people are saying and what they seem to be doing.

For example, although environmental performance is one of the top ten issues people consider when looking to purchase a truck – 36% said it was critically important in the study, in fact – people are noticeably less

concerned about the cost of operation or the lifetime costs of the truck – just 21% said that this was critically important.

More worryingly, perhaps, previous studies have shown that less than 20% of users actually monitor the energy costs associated with the use of their lift trucks. It is difficult to see how people can be genuinely concerned about the environment or, for that matter, be including forklift trucks in the calculation of their company's carbon footprint, if they have no idea how much energy they are actually using.

Looking ahead, it's not clear if the patterns witnessed in the automotive sector are likely to repeat themselves in the materials handling market. If they do, it seems highly likely that truck users will become more conscious of energy costs and potentially look for trucks that are cheaper to run.

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By way of comparison, the market for basic cars – that is to say, highly fuel efficient vehicles such as the Fiat Panda, Ford Ka and Citroen C1 – increased by over 10% across Western Europe in 2008, compared with a fall of over 6% for all other vehicles. It may be that people are buying such cars because

they are concerned about the environment but there's a lot of evidence to suggest that people are motivated more by what's good for them financially (and if that happens to be 'green' as well, it is just a bonus).

If this pattern is followed in the truck market, then energy consumption will become an issue and the demand for fuel-efficient trucks is likely to increase. However, for this to happen, people buying trucks need to change the way they think and act.

Price concerns

At the moment, price is still considered to be the most important issue (critically important to 45% of respondents) compared to cost of spare parts (38%), cost of service (37%) and cost of operation (30%). This may be partially attributable to the level of leasing that now takes place, but it is also clear that users of trucks are not good at collecting the type of information they need to make more sophisticated purchase decisions based on operational or lifetime costs, rather than the upfront price.

Although this is not necessarily a problem, with rising energy costs and increasingly complex purchasing agreements, a detailed knowledge of operating costs and patterns would help users make better informed decisions – decisions that would be good for them and good for the environment, too. ■

The survey referred to in this article consisted of 1,400 interviews with managers in charge of materials handling in manufacturing and distribution companies. It covered firms in Germany, France, the UK, Italy and Spain and was sponsored by a range of lift truck manufacturers, including Cat Lift Trucks.

For more information, email: guywasher@redshiftresearch.co.uk

Events calendar

Date, Event, Location, Website	Overview
20-24 April Hannover Messe Hannover, Germany www.hannovermesse.de	Massive exhibition incorporating such areas as production automation, factory automation, industrial building automation, industrial robots and energy efficiency.
21-24 April TransRussia Moscow, Russia www.transrussia.ru	14th annual international transport and logistics exhibition and conference with over 500 exhibitors and 13,000 sq m of exhibition space.
7-10 May Transport and Logistics 2009 Riga, Latvia www.bt1.lv/bt1/translog	International exhibition and conference covering transport, logistics and communications technologies.
12-15 May Transport Logistic Munich, Germany www.transportlogistic.de	12th international exhibition for logistics, telematics and transport with over 1,600 exhibitors from 53 countries.
13-17 May Packaging Depot Chisinau, Moldova www.packaging-depot.moldexpo.md	Packaging equipment and packaging materials show, also covering printing, marking and labelling technologies.
14-17 May Iskon 2009 Konya, Turkey www.tuyap.com.tr	Fourth outing for this logistics fair, which covers materials handling, storage and distribution products and services.
26-27 May Platform Logistique Lyon, France www.top-transport.net	Exhibition aimed at warehouse and logistics directors covering logistics infrastructure as well as warehouse equipment, services, technologies and IT systems.