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Trucking's Green Report Card

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Are strategies living up to expectations?

The pressure on fleets to be green is intense these days, and only growing more so. Society's concern over environmental issues has never been stronger, government regulation and incentives never broader, corporate focus never sharper, and rewards never greater. Researchers, scientists, engineers and suppliers have responded with what can be a bewildering array of green options that may or may not deliver on their promises in any given fleet operation. And that leaves fleet managers facing expensive, high-risk choices.

To their credit, many fleets have embraced the green mandate and made the commitment to use less fuel, create less waste, contribute to cleaner air and water, and in general do what they can to address environmental issues. As the second part of this story documents, trucking as an industry is receiving high grades for its contributions to a greener environment, and with the next step in diesel emissions reduction in 2010, it should find itself on the honor roll.

The important work leading to that common improvement is being done at the individual fleet level, where those responsible not only need to determine the most potentially effective strategies for their particular operation, but also make sure those strategies deliver on expectations. They need to be good guardians of their business as well as the environment; and measure real-world performance for its impact on both types of green.

Vermont may be the greenest of our states, with its Green Mountains, its economy based on farming and outdoor activities, its free-thinking citizens, and even its name, which means "green mountain" in French. Bourne's Energy is a 60-year-old family business in the Burlington area delivering fuel oil and propane, and providing plumbing and heating service. Today, it's both a supplier and user of biodiesel as well, and is shortly going to be one of the first to use hybrid tank trucks to deliver fuel.

The company began delivering biodiesel blends three years ago because "it just was the right thing to do," says Peter Bourne, president and one of two brothers running the company founded by their father.

"We expect that there will eventually be mandates requiring biofuels, so we decided to take the lead on the issue as long as we could still be competitive on price," says Bourne.

Today, all of its home heating oil customers get a B2 blend, but "we're shooting for B5," Bourne says. Transport users get a B5 diesel blend, which is what Bourne puts in its own fleet of ten tank trucks and lighter pickups and vans used for field service. "We started with a B5 blend because it was enough to get our feet wet, but not enough to create problems with cleaning tanks and filters and so on," says Bourne. "Now we have one customer that switches to B20 in the summer."

The next step in Bourne's sustainable green strategy is putting two diesel hybrids into its home delivery service later this month. The trucks were jointly developed by Ryder, which is leasing the vehicles to Bourne, and Navistar, and are among the first hybrid applications for liquid fuel delivery. The trucks use the battery storage portion of the hybrid diesel design to run product pumps without idling. To do that safely, they had to be modified to draw clean air for the batteries' cooling system and to avoid pulling in hazardous fumes from the fuel being delivered.

The trucks will go into service in urban areas where there's a relatively high density of customers and where there's a higher ratio of time spent pumping to time traveling on the road. "We expect to have the most [fuel] savings where we spend a lot of time running PTO pumps now," says Bourne. "Running them on battery power could theoretically double our fuel mileage. We'll know where we stand by the end of the year when we have some actual mileage numbers."

Although it depends on diesel price, the company expects the hybrids to at least cover the additional cost of the green technology. "We expect to save some money, though not enough to retire on. And if diesel goes back to \$4 to \$5 a gallon, we'll be talking real numbers," says Bourne.

"Vermont is a very green state," Bourne concludes. "Taking these kinds of reasonable risks is a positive way to market and attract new customers. We tell people we're a company that's making sure you don't burn more fuel than you have to, and we're doing it in the greenest way possible. But we have to be profitable, too. We're going to be as green as we can be and still sustain that effort. We don't want to be a one-hit wonder."

BENCHMARK SAVINGS

As one of the world's largest food processors and producers, Kraft Foods is committed to a corporate-wide green initiative, and transportation is one of the six areas it's identified as the major contributors to that initiative. While the company's North American operations use common and dedicated carriers for large portions of its truck transportation, it also has a private fleet with 275 power units, 925 refrigerated trailers and 50 dry vans.

The Environmental Protection Agency's SmartWay program for improving transportation efficiency offered a practical path for the fleet's initial green initiatives, according to Eugene Tierney, senior manager of Kraft's private fleet. "SmartWay focuses on specific things that reduce fuel consumption and eliminate waste," he says. "They focused our attention on looking at fuel-saving technologies, things that are both green and lower costs."

Optimized engine specs, low rolling resistance tires, better vehicle aerodynamics, lower weight components and auxiliary power units were among the low-hanging fruit endorsed by SmartWay and chosen by Kraft. And once those elements were in place, it was important to evaluate the fleet's progress, explains Tierney.

"We had a good starting point for benchmarking because we measure fuel consumption at the tractor level," he says. "Having that mpg history by tractor gives us an accurate picture of how we're doing."

Moving beyond SmartWay and its emphasis on equipment specs, Kraft also found valuable help in focusing its green fleet initiatives by talking to others in the industry, especially for-hire carriers. "They told me they were saving significant amounts of fuel by slowing trucks down from 72 to 65 mph," says Tierney. "They estimate that every mph over 55 costs them 0.1 mpg."

To prove the value of that strategy, Kraft took eight tractors that always run the same routes and dropped their top speed from 65 mph to 62. "They improved their fuel economy by 0.3 mpg, substantiating that we could save fuel by slowing down," says Tierney. "That improvement alone will save the fleet \$1.5 million a year, so now we have a corporate-wide 62-mpg speed limit for our tractors."

Drivers have also become a key element in the Kraft private fleet's green efforts, not only slowing down but also substantially reducing idle time by using APUs and cab heaters, and following company policies to minimize idle time. "Each of our seven terminals gives them report cards on mpg and idle time performance," Tierney says. "And then we rack it back up to the terminal level and finally measure at the private fleet level."

Kraft's green truck initiatives even extend to its for-hire carriers these days. Super Truck, a program to maximize trailer weight and cube usage with an optimization software package, has helped the company put more product on both its trucks and those of its carriers. "We've implemented it at 20 of our largest plants and estimate we've taken 1,500 trucks off the road, saving 1 million mi. of truck travel," says Tierney.

Driven by its green initiatives, Kraft's fleet "has changed the way we do business more in the last 18 months than in the last five years," says Tierney. Whether it's under-loaded trailers or tractor efficiency, "we've found that if you focus on it, there's a tendency to improve it," Tierney says. And focus, as any good student will tell you, it is the key to good grades.

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