ON THE SOAPBOX

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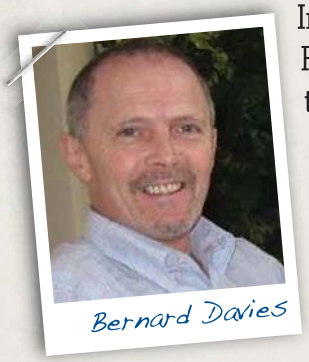
Taking emissions reductions on board


Bernard Davies

In the first of a new series of columns, Bernard Davies, Director at Fleet Force Ltd, opines on how car manufacturers can cut emissions, not just through greener cars but also through greener methods of logistics.

Well, 2011 has arrived and with it some long-awaited UK government subsidies for battery electric vehicles and those manufacturers with products available now, or in the pipeline, will be anxiously encouraging early adopters to place their orders. Among those manufacturers will be Nissan with the new LEAF.

This set me thinking and my research took me down another line.

For some years now governments have focused on CO_2 emissions, using them as a convenient (and lucrative) way of raising tax revenue at the expense of business and the motorist in general. Not too many of these governments appear to be offering real transportation alternatives.

I can understand why CO_2 has received so much of their attention – it's easy to measure and easy for the consumer to understand, but the taxes levied take no account of real-life usage. A car with a roof-box or carrying heavy weights will use more fuel and therefore have increased emissions than a vehicle of exactly the same specification without those loads. Similarly, driving with the windows or sun-roof open will impact on fuel consumption and therefore emissions. The introduction of low rolling resistance tyres on many "eco" models has had a positive impact on emissions, but there is no requirement for these tyres to be replaced with a like-for-like specification when they are changed. So we have to conclude that this is no more than a relatively easy and convenient way for governments to raise taxes!

That said, this focus has forced the manufacturers to become more creative, spending billions in the process, producing more and more efficient engines, reducing weight and generally optimising fuel efficiency, which is to the benefit of the environment and, ultimately to us all.

So why have other industries not had the same attention?

Take shipping.

Of the 50,000 plus ships – container, cruise, supertankers and the like – sailing the seven seas, the vast majority use heavy fuel oils to power their engines. These heavy fuel oils, commonly called "bunker fuel" or "residual fuel oil", is what remains after gasoline, diesel and light fuel oils etc have been extracted during the refining process. And this stuff is not very good for the environment, but I guess the ships are out of sight of land for most of the time and therefore "off the radar"; they're also probably more difficult to tax!

Which brings me back to the beginning. I was delighted to discover that Nissan have scored again by introducing a new energy-efficient car carrier to deliver the new LEAF around Europe. It is reported that this ship, the City of St Petersburg, will cut fuel consumption by around 800 tons annually. This equates to a reduction of approximately 2,500 tons of CO_2, or nearly 21 MILLION KILOMETRES at the current industry benchmark of 120g/km. Incidentally – if every one of those 50,000 plus ships saved 2,500 tons of CO_2 annually, the world would have 125 million fewer tons of CO_2 to absorb every year...

I'm not sure if this holistic approach was intentional, but if I were in the PR department at Nissan I'd be making sure that the world knew about this as well.