

BUS MONITORING DEVICES SAVE Money, FIGHT Lawsuits

Panelists at Motorcoach Expo in Charlotte give maintenance tips.



About 2,200 attended the two-day trade show that was part of Motorcoach Expo '97. There were more than 160 exhibitors, among them the major coach manufacturers. One bus manufacturer is said to have sold 90 buses during the show, although official numbers are difficult to obtain. Next year's Expo will be held Feb. 1 to 3 in Sacramento, CA.

SUPERVISE YOUR BUSES as you would your children and you will be rewarded with healthy offspring who eat well and bring home wonderful report cards.

That was the message from a panel of experts at Motorcoach Expo '97 in Charlotte, NC, who gave maintenance and other tips on the care and feeding of buses. The show was sponsored by the United Motorcoach Association (UMA) and the American Bus Association (ABA).

BY LENNY LEVINE

"I can sleep all night and do what I want on weekends if I take care of my buses," says Michael Kraft, director of vehicle operations for Kraftours in Tulsa, OK, the family's bus business since 1915. Here are some of the things he does:

1. Sends his oil out for analysis to make sure he gets what he paid for (he uses top-grade oil).

2. Analyze engine fluids. "I can plot the day my engine will no longer run and when it will become a boat anchor," Kraft says.

3. Do your homework on air conditioning and especially the new refrigerants. (See *METRO* January/February 1997, p.43.)

4. Disc brakes and electronic brakes are proliferating; always check them.

5. Talk to your drivers. Ask them what the problems are for a particular bus.

6. And there is this advice from Kraft, who is also a lawyer ("You can't be in business today without being a lawyer, or at least having one in the family"): Be prepared for a lawsuit.

"We have 45,000 lbs. hurtling down the highway," Kraft says, "and I'm held responsible for an accident. I must show that I have behaved like a 'reasonable person' about that accident. Did this coach driver do everything possible to prevent the accident? We document that we've done everything possible to prevent accidents. We can't do *everything*, but we do *everything we can think of*."

Lawsuit protection

Sonny Owenby put \$35,000 in his company's pocket last year with a vehicle management system, and figures he would have saved the company \$80,000 more from a lawsuit if the system had been in place earlier.

Motorcoach operators are taking a cue from the public transit industry and using onboard systems that monitor vehicle performance and fluid usage.

Owenby is operations manager for Burke International Tours in Newton, NC, which has 28 coaches and other smaller buses and vans. Burke does tours, charters and preforms.

The \$35,000 was saved, Owenby says, because his Detroit Diesel onboard vehicle management system upped his mileage from "the low 7s to 8 mpg." He also enthuses about these numbers after using the system: Cruise control went from 18 to 40 percent; high idle from 27 to less than

10 percent; and regular idle went from 30 to less than 15 percent.

"I'm saving about \$1,500 on each coach," Owenby says, about what the system costs. "The system also tells us where the driver goes where he is not supposed to go (such as driving 20 miles in the bus to get a cup of coffee for himself while the passengers are in their rooms for the night), and tells us that the coach was idling for 2.5 hours while the passengers were at the Grand Ole Opry. The system tells us the speed of the bus. It tells us if

the driver decelerates too fast."

That enables Owenby to train his drivers using data from the system. He also says his tires last longer and his coaches last longer. He has changed his regular maintenance from 10,000 to 7,500 miles.

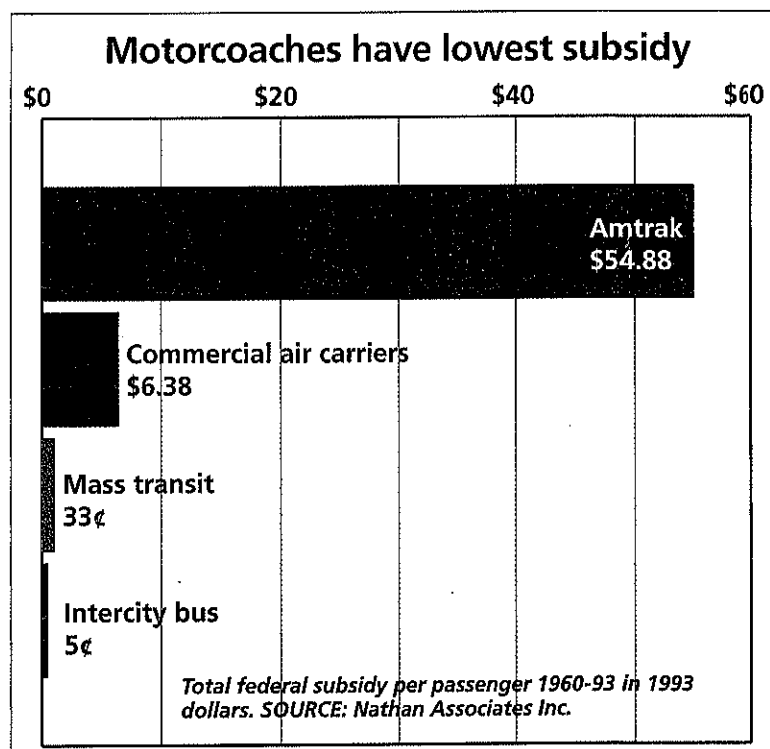
He also discovered that the driver's foot moves on the pedal every time the motorcoach hits a bump, further decreasing mpg.

"Shut off your coach," he says. "Don't keep the air conditioning running while the driver is at lunch. Now, I don't want the passengers to be uncomfortable, but the driver doesn't need to idle for 30 minutes while the bus is parked behind the motel."

That lawsuit that cost Burke International \$80,000 that could have been prevented? Owenby tells this story: "If I had had that onboard system I could have downloaded information and sent it to the Highway Patrol and the case never would have gone to court. Because the two-minute window of information would have shown that the driver did everything properly. But we were sued because they said we're a bus company and we've got money, right?"

Uncle Sam has good news

Norm Littler, the American Bus Association's director of operations



The seminar on maintenance drew an active crowd of questioners, despite competition from the hometown Carolina Panthers division championship professional football game.

and regulatory affairs, offered a rarity—good news from Uncle Sam.

Littler, taking a look at the next 20 years, says the federal government promises that ITS (Intelligent Transportation Systems) will be voluntary for motorcoaches. He predicts no unfunded mandates for motorcoaches.

He also said that the National Transportation Safety Board, in its continuing study of passenger protection on motorcoaches, is not fully convinced that seat belts are the way to go. Compartmentalization may be the wave of the future, Littler says, with perhaps seat belts in the front row.

"Do we still need push-out windows on motorcoaches?" he asks. That requirement—which adds weight and cost to motorcoaches—is a legacy from 1952 regulations when most buses were powered by gasoline and fires were a problem. Fires are not a problem with today's diesel buses, Littler says, and notes that in roll-over accidents, many passengers are ejected out the push-out windows.

Buses in the next 20 years will be weighed at mainline speeds by sensors in the highway, negating the need to pull over for those inspections, Littler says. However, the buses could be pulled over if overloaded, and then the driver faces a possible dilemma: Does he remove passengers or luggage to get down to the proper weight? That scenario *could* happen, Littler says, but probably won't.

Littler notes that as the weight of the bus decreases with the use of new com-

posites, a trickle-down effect will also reduce the weight of other components.

Littler did mention one dramatic change in store for motorcoach operators by 2011. The Environmental Protection Agency has said it wants no more diesel soot by that year. So the bus of the future may very well be powered by something other than diesel.



The ABA's Norm Littler says the bus of the future is being debated and designed now.

Subsidy is safe

Susan Perry, ABA senior vice president of government relations, also had some good news for operators. She said the 17-cent-a-gallon subsidy they get on diesel fuel is safe for now. That subsidy is worth \$20 million yearly to the industry, she says.

A task force in Congress is looking at all transportation subsidies, Perry says, including the motorcoach diesel tax exemption. "No one is coming after us this time," she says, but more people in Washington now know motorcoach operators have the exemption. She notes that the exemption for ethanol is worth hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

Perry says motorcoach operators must remain vigilant to retain their subsidy, which amounts to a nickel per intercity passenger (chart).

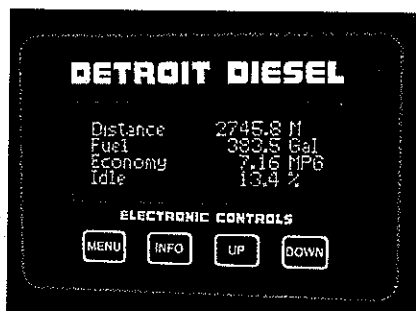
"No one is coming after us this time."

ABA's Susan Perry, on the invulnerability of the diesel tax subsidy

Steve Sprague, Perry's counterpart at UMA, says the industry is reviewing four main regulatory areas:

1. Hours of service operation.
2. Training of drivers, mechanics and staff.
3. Data collection, especially on drivers who have accidents.
4. Coach inspections.

Sprague says New York state will fine you \$1,000 if you are caught there with an uninspected coach. However, you are now able to get the coach inspected on the spot and send in that inspection notice to kill the ticket, he says. **M**



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