

5 STEPS TO A GREENER FLEET



Regardless of your operation's fleet size or budget constraints, there's always something that can be done to make your vehicles more sustainable and efficient.

BY HEATHER TAYLOR

The soaring price of fuel has pushed some landscape companies to seek budget-driven practices and alternative fuels. For other business owners, the motivation to become more efficient comes from the need to project an environmentally friendly image in the community. Some contractors just want to adopt more earth-minded business practices.

The reasons might be different, but every business can use the same solutions to achieve its goals, and they all involve transforming the vehicle fleet to become more sustainable. Here are five steps fleet managers can take to create a greener, more efficient and less expensive fleet.

1 Fuel a transformation. Switching the fleet to vehicles that are fueled by something other than gasoline might seem like one of the most obvious ways to go green. There's good reason: Electric and hybrid vehicles produce as much as 100 percent fewer carbon dioxide emissions than comparable gasoline-powered vehicles, according to Amy Blaine, director of strategic consulting and sustainability at Donlen, a fleet management corporation. Propane and natural gas-powered vehicles emit 10 percent to 25 percent less carbon dioxide than gas-fueled vehicles. While diesel fuel might produce more emissions, it gets better mileage than gasoline, so it's more efficient that way.

The cost of the alternative fuels depends on availability and other factors, but often they're cheaper than gasoline, Blaine adds. Local Clean Cities Coalition offices, run by the U.S. Department of Energy, can offer more information and local contacts to help companies locate nearby alternative fuel sources. Visit cleancities.energy.gov for details.

Perceptions about oddly designed hybrids or electric cars are no longer valid, Blaine says, explaining that most alternative-fueled vehicles today look extremely similar—if not identical—to their gasoline-fueled counterparts.

"If you haven't considered alternative fuel vehicles in a while, it might be time to investigate the options again," she says.

If a jump to a more fuel-efficient fleet is too expensive because of initial acquisition costs, start by replacing one or two vehicles. Gradual integration also can provide a chance to track just how much of a difference the switch to alternative fuels makes.

Still not sold on alternative fuels? Many automotive manufacturers have improved the mileage of their gasoline-powered models significantly in the past couple of years. Just switching to a newer model gas-powered vehicle could lead to big fuel and budget savings.

2 Don't underestimate upkeep. Small steps can go a long way toward enhancing performance and reducing emissions. The simple practice of maintaining the proper air pressure in a vehicle's tires can increase gas mileage by more than 3 percent, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Likewise, seemingly insignificant repairs shouldn't be overlooked. Fixing a faulty oxygen sensor, for example, can improve vehicle mileage by as much as 40 percent, Blaine says.

Sometimes it makes more sense to replace a vehicle rather than fix it, and doing so can be more environmentally friendly than people think, Blaine says. She explains that when an older model is traded in for a newer, more efficient one, the next owner of the old vehicle usually is a driver who is upgrading from an even older, less efficient vehicle. So everyone involved is then driving a more efficient vehicle than he or she was before. Plus, Blaine adds, even at the end of its life, much of a vehicle's parts can be recycled.

Also, when updating fleets, managers should consider switching to a smaller vehicle if possible—for example, employees without production duties may switch from a truck to an SUV or from an SUV to a sedan, Blaine suggests.

Fleet managers can determine the optimal time to replace vehicles by figuring out when total costs would be minimized and by looking at the maintenance profile of each vehicle. When the vehicle is replaced, choose a cost-effective replacement that meets the organization's other goals and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

3 Change up your oil. Along with regular oil changes for each vehicle, the type of oil that's used can make a difference when it comes to vehicle efficiency and environmental impact. Newer processes in oil refinement have made it possible for recycled motor oil to hit the market.

Recycled oil is used motor oil that has been re-refined using the same process that is used to refine crude oil. The recycled oil has been shown to perform in engines just as well as first-run oil, with very little price difference, according to Thom Smith, vice president of branded lubricant technology at Valvoline.

He says reused oil reduces environmental impact because it requires less energy, reduces crude oil demand and produces fewer pollutants. For a fleet of 1,000 vehicles that undergoes four oil changes per year, switching to reused oil reduces crude oil demand by 12,000 gallons, cuts down on greenhouse gases by 13,000 pounds and reduces other pollutants by 143 pounds.

Whether it's reused or not, the quality of oil still counts, Smith says.

"If you have poor-quality used oil, you don't get same level of performance as you would with high-quality used oil," he says.

4 Track effectiveness with telematics. Knowing a fleet's (and drivers') specific fuel-wasting tendencies is the key to improving the fleet's environmental footprint. Telematics are increasingly used to track a number of fuel use metrics. Telematics is a type of technology that generally involves placing a device in each vehicle in the fleet. The device sends data to a software program that can usually be viewed via the Internet.

Telematics can record and report data including vehicle location, miles traveled and time spent speeding and idling, according to Chris Ransom, director of product management at Networkfleet, a telematics manufacturer.

To properly track and improve fuel-wasting behavior, Ransom recommends beginning by completing what's known as baselining: announce an official start date for the tracking devices to all employees, but place the devices in all the vehicles about a month before the start date and turn them on. That will give managers a good picture of normal vehicle use because the drivers don't yet know they're being tracked. It also will give management a good idea of areas to improve.

Ransom's clients, which include companies and municipi-

palities, have seen significant efficiency-boosting results using telematics. One organization reduced its instances of speeding from 2,000 per week to 100 per week, while another cut down on the average number of miles driven. Drivers were less likely to make unnecessary stops when the telematics system was being used. All of these improvements led to a decrease in fuel use.

Another one of his clients reduced the fleet's idling events drastically from more than 15 times per week to five times per week. This change alone can have a sizable impact on a vehicle's gas mileage, Ransom says.

"Even a little can make a difference," he says.

Assuming gas costs \$3.50 per gallon, and telematics improves efficiency by 10 percent, the resulting fuel savings is \$380 per vehicle per year, Blaine says.

To successfully integrate a telematics program, managers should be clear about the objectives for becoming

more efficient and how employees are expected to contribute to the goals, Ransom says. After all, tracking devices are only as effective as those using them.

"If it's not being utilized, it's worthless," he says.

5 Sustain employee buy-in. Being upfront and open about the company's fleet goals is the best tactic to encourage employee adoption, Ransom says.

He recommends regularly sharing the fleet improvement program's results to make employees feel a part of the effort. For example, share when instances of idling are decreasing, along with the amount of fuel it saves each month. The employees will realize the contributions they're making, he adds.

"Whatever the pitch is, you're going to find buy-in across the business," he says.

In addition, incentivize the top performers to boost participation.

"At least when it comes to telematics, the carrot is much more effective than the stick," Ransom says, adding, "We've got customers that give out gift cards for the employee with lowest idling numbers each month or the fewest speeding instances. Once you create that kind of competition and pride, then you're in good shape. You've gotten the most out of your system."

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