

Fork Authority

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When Don Martindale sees a lift truck with damaged lights, seats, or forks, he doesn't view it as normal wear and tear, rather, "the canary in the coal mine." According to Martindale, president of international supplier of forklift parts and accessories Panacea Aftermarket Co., these are the most common areas that need to be replaced, however: "This is usually a direct result of operators not being trained properly or, even worse, being trained and not acting in a professional or responsible manner. It speaks to a larger problem that needs to be quickly addressed."

Safety

What Martindale points out is certainly not lost on a typical plant or warehouse manager, whose job requires continuously ensuring that the forklifts are being used by well-trained, professional operators. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), work-related deaths have been steadily decreasing over the past decade. Despite this, it still notes that 16 percent of fatal work injuries result from "contact with objects and equipment." Considering that a forklift is arguably one of the most dangerous pieces of equipment in a given facility — and can easily be party to collisions and other contact — these statistics should be cause for concern if a plant manager has any misgivings as to how a truck is being operated. Symptomatic of this, seeing more required reactionary maintenance than usual would also be a red flag. Bruce Marti, national manager of parts, service, customer satisfaction, and customer service support operations for Toyota Material Handling, U.S.A., says the parts that tend to see the most abuse vary from application to application, but generally cites body panels, tires, and forks as the most abused components he sees. "Abuse can usually be attributed to three things: contact, poor housekeeping, and improper use," says Marti. "All of the above parts tend to be the victims of those three variables."

Adds Martindale: "Forklift trucks at their best are of tremendous value and significantly add to the bottom line performance and efficiency. At their worst, they are non-recoverable expenses and exposure on wheels. In my experience, the relatively small abuse repair cost does not compare to the amounts companies spend on product damage, downtime, and injuries."

Repair

Besides safety risks, the repair issues that result from careless use of industrial vehicles can result in some costly investments — not to mention the downtime that Martindale refers to. With industrial users increasingly streamlining their fleets, it's oftentimes the case where they no longer have a back-up truck sitting idle in the

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event of a severe maintenance issue. For Marti, having a good lift truck repair program in place, along with working with a dealership, can improve a lift truck's uptime and overall lifetime. "The benefit of a well-designed lift truck repair program is lower cost of ownership through the lifecycle of the lift truck, and can delay the decision to replace a lift truck by extending its useful life," says Marti. "This type of program will also improve the customer's productivity by potentially reducing downtime and providing safer equipment for the driver to use."

In addition, says Martindale, the professional fleet manager should be cognizant of the fact that forklifts need to be viewed as other rolling fleets — like over-the-road equipment and cars. With this watchful eye in place — and with predictive maintenance in mind — "Abuse repairs can be spotted and addressed earlier."

Functionality

Much like any plant and warehouse equipment, technology improvements tend to drive the value proposition of investing. For Marti and Martindale, new developments based on operator need are becoming more prevalent in customer functionality requirements:

- **Scales/Load Weight Management:** "Scales are one of the upgrades more customers are requesting. Previously an add-on, Toyota now offers scale integration. This allows for simultaneous weighing and transportation of loads, resulting in increased efficiency and reduced logistic expenses," explains Marti. "The scale enables operators to quickly view, record, or transfer legal-for-trade load weight information as the load is being transported through the facility." With the ability to weigh loads en route, integrated scales eliminate the repetitive, time-consuming process of transporting loads to and from floor scales. Warehouse and freight terminal operators, dependent on weight data for their shipping fees, benefit from an integrated scale, which will help avoid costly weight discrepancies and works to ensure safe trailer load weight.
- **Ergonomics:** "In the recent past, seat products have been greatly improved to offer improved comfort and ergonomics," says Martindale. "Remember, there are no shock absorbers or any type of suspension on a forklift, so the operator is exposed to every bump and jolt. There are seats available now that match the all-day comfort which you see in the automotive market."
- **Connectivity:** "Real time data at first was relatively expensive and was usually seen in the larger fleets. Now the pricing is such that even the single user can benefit," Martindale says. Key benefits of this technology get at the core of operator use, allowing management the kind of data that can actually prevent misuse or overuse, remind them of upcoming preventive maintenance requirements, and help them decide whether the number of trucks they have in service is appropriate. "These products can tell you if the operator is traveling too fast, turning too sharply, is with or without a load and at what height, if there were any sudden jolts or shocks and how bad they were, when the unit is throwing a repair or diagnostic code, seat time, as well as actual travel time," says Martindale. "All of this can be

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monitored in real time or alerts can be emailed or texted. My favorite is the product that controls speed in a designated area. I do not believe there is a situation or event that cannot be monitored, including restricting access to certain parts of a warehouse.”

With these new tech developments will likely come a learning curve as operators adjust to these improvements in functionality and revised maintenance requirements. The good news is how the greatest concerns for management — safety and appropriate use of equipment — can be balanced with some of the aforementioned connectivity solutions that can better monitor speeds, conditions, travel time, and the drivers themselves. Couple a reduction in preventable repairs with the improved logistics through load weight management, and users can be well on their way to a less cost-intensive lift truck fleet.

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