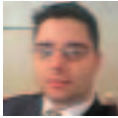


Communications Partner – the vital ingredient for TSP's



But are they doing enough? **Brian Martin** takes a look at the role of the TSP and their partnerships with communication providers

DURING THE GOLD RUSH YEARS, IT wasn't just those that found the gold that made the money. In fact the first providers of 'pans', 'picks' and 'shovels' also made their millions

...Sounds familiar?

The market place for Telematics Service providers is still growing. The demand has yet to waiver, although the descriptions may have changed the companies remain the same. In 2002 during the Commercial Vehicle Show in the UK, we saw 44 Fleet Management Systems, and 20 Vehicle Tracking companies exhibit, whereas the 2004 show saw 50 Fleet Management Systems and 15 Vehicle Tracking companies exhibit. Who knows we may yet see the inclusion of the terminology of Telematics Service Providers (TSP's).

I have to admit there are a lot of good TSP's in the UK and world wide, each of whom have either re-badged or developed their own hardware and software to varying degrees of complexity, ease of use and success. However no matter how large or small the TSP, they are all dependant on a communications partner to transfer the data/information to and from the vehicle, PC or machine. Today's communications partner has become yesterdays 'pans', 'picks' and 'shovels' provider and are equally as important to their users.

When you think of a communications provider, you would be forgiven to automatically consider the big 4. However, biggest does not always mean best. When looking into the relationship between TSP's and data communications providers I was very keen to understand first hand how these relationships fared. Thus I simply

asked a few TSP's (15 UK based) about their own working relationships, and how these could be improved. I was taken aback by the consistency of the answers.

The top 3 issues were: Unable to help, Not flexible and account management

'Unable to Help':

Even established TSP's recalled of the difficulties in actually getting started, or having their questions answered. An example being a Multi Million pound warehouse tracking company that had vehicle tracking within their portfolio. They were looking to integrate the two solutions together for the UK market, thus creating full End-2-end tracking of goods. They approached the big communications companies in the UK and asked what were the factors that determine and the different choices for both Mobile connection into GSM network and Back-Office connection into GSM network?

The answer was: We do not have enough knowledge to have a discussion and are unable to help.

'Not Flexible':

Most TSP's offer scaleable solutions, with a bolt on here and there. Hardware and software price flexibility can easily be achieved, yet to get flexibility with data communication isn't that straight forward. Most TSP's found that there was no, or very little choice of data Tariffs. Frustrating, when you compare this with the unlimited price comparisons and choices you can get with voice. Instead the communications partners tended to have a 'one solution fits all' solution, with limited structure or flexibility.

The biggest grievance of all was that of 'Account Management':

This was down to the quality and experience of the Account managers put before them. Account managers were described as: Technologically challenged, unable to grasp the concept of a data only SIM, unable or unwilling to understand their customers business and ultimately not telematics specialists.

There does seem to be a direct correlation between the number of connections and the amount of support or account management a company receives. Because the volumes for data communications are not as big as voice, neither is the support or account management.

Other issues included those over reliability, security, roaming and billing, and the inconsistencies and confusions found there in. However it is interesting that TSP's should place a higher value on the human aspects of doing business, over the operational side. Looking at the importance national operators seem to place upon the Telematics Industry, it is no wonder that we are now seeing companies, that can not only solve the reliability, security, roaming and billing issues but are fast becoming the specialists in data communications, and are able to offer 'help', 'flexibility' and knowledgeable 'account management' - today's new and improved 'pans', 'picks' and 'shovels'. These new communication partner companies not only do the job in hand better, but are also keen to work with the users (TSP's), for feedback and continuous improvements – how novel. ■

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