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# Going up

The UK/Ireland van mounted lift market is highly susceptible to changing market conditions. Annual sales are generally limited to between 600 to 750 units a year - sometimes less - and with just a few major customers taking the majority it can be a fine line between feast or famine.

In our last review of the market some two years ago, the van mounted market was buoyant, having recovered from a 'sticky' year when one of the major UK players - BT - decided to delay its usual 250 unit order. However it was also feeling the repercussions from chassis weight gains to cope with Euro IV engine emissions and dealing with the increasing number of 'younger' drivers that can only drive a 3.5 tonne vehicle on a standard driving licence.

Since then the market has been relatively good, but has been slowing recently. The general economic climate is of course a factor, but the move towards large 20 and 25 year Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) involving major contractors such as Scottish and Southern Energy, Amey, Balfour Beatty and Carillion is leading towards even greater consolidation. The unsettled nature of energy

production and the associated takeover rumours surrounding the sale of part of the UK's electrical network is also doing little to stabilise the market.

The UK's biggest electricity network covering London, the South East and eastern England was sold by France's EDF in July, in a deal worth £5.8 billion to infrastructure fund Cheung Kong, which is controlled by Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing - the current owner of UK distribution firm Northern Gas Networks. The EDF network serves around 7.8 million customers and has 170,000 kilometres of underground cables and overhead lines and 66,300 substations.

But it is the PFI projects that appear to be causing some short-term issues. Last August, Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE) won the largest street lighting PFI project in the UK, its wholly-owned subsidiary Tay Valley Lighting being appointed preferred bidder for the £225million,



c&a

van mounts

25-year South Coast street lighting project. The project includes lighting services for Hampshire County Council, Southampton City Council and West Sussex County Council with another of SSE's subsidiaries - Southern Electric Contracting - replacing and maintaining 250,000 street lights, illuminated signs and bollards.

SSE has also won the 25 year street lighting PFI for Nottingham City Council taking the number of long-term, local authority street lighting and replacement and maintenance PFI contracts to 11 and the number of lighting units covered by such contracts to about 550,000.

These PFI projects may be great for the winning contractor but it has given the UK van mounted lift manufacturers - such as Versalift, Gardner Denver, Skyking/GSR, Aldecote and more recently Ascendant - some challenges as the buying power becomes even more concentrated.

Northamptonshire-based Versalift has been market leader for several years and is still the dominant manufacturer in this sector and believes that the market has become more difficult with the growth of such large PFI projects.

Versalift managing director Steve Couling said: "We are fortunate in that we made sure that we were involved with these major contractors early on and bent over backwards to encourage them to specify our equipment, going to great lengths to improve our products for their operators. As a result we have won a large proportion of the work with our bespoke specifications."

"Because of the Work and Height regulations contractors required more outreach at low levels,



Ascendant's new 12.5m van mount



A K-Lift Streetmaster V145



sensors for additional outreach with one man working on the platform, walk-in baskets which have proved popular with both the operators and the health & safety inspectors as well as 1,000 volt insulation and 3,000 volt flash protection which gives the operator added protection if they happen touch a power line," he said.

"All these requirements and more have been designed into the machine, whereas a few years ago we may well have simply added a few roof beacons to the standard machine. When a van is ordered

The reduction is largely a result of the major contractors running smaller fleets at higher utilisation rates – in other words working them longer hours. However on the other side they have a more professional and systematic approach to fleet management, replacing them at regular intervals. Rental fleet van mounts are generally replaced after around five years or so, while BT has traditionally operated a policy of changing its units out after six and a half years. This is changing with extensions of up to eight or nine years not uncommon.



*Gardner Denver's VM8.75 has a 1550kg GVW*

by one of the main contractors, it goes from the factory straight into service," says Couling. "Historically the basic platform would have shipped from us to a bodybuilding company for dry lining and racking etc prior to the customer taking delivery, but now we are a 'one stop shop' and do the whole package from LED light bars and full livery to extensive racking and hand wash units - even the storage bins onboard are filled up with the nuts and bolts and fittings required for the job."

So while this market may have shrunk from around 550 to 600 units, over the past year to 18 months - it is now as low as 450 - fortunately we have maintained similar volumes, giving us a larger share of the smaller market."

After six years of regular use it is the van which shows its age the most, having taken the brunt of the day to day wear, clocking up lots of miles with a fair amount of abuse from various operators. BT tends to operate a single operator policy, with one operator staying with the unit throughout its life so it does tend to fare better.

Lifts that use a chain or cable boom telescope system tend to be fully refurbished after five years. On an insulated platform this means removing the boom to carry out the work. When doing this it makes sense to not only check everything through but also to change any wear parts such as hoses while the boom is out. Some utility companies use this check to carry out a more extensive refurbishment



*Versalift offers all electric, semi and retro-fit battery packs*

- more of a rebuild - knowing that it then has a clean bill of health for the next five years. By having the vehicle re-sprayed it also maintains the corporate image.

### A bit on the heavy side

One of the major developments that affected the 3.5 tonne van sector was, as we have already said, the introduction of the Euro IV vehicles in mid-2006. With chassis arriving 100kg heavier the reduction in the available payload was almost significant enough to cripple the sector. Many manufactures had to redesign their products using higher strength steels in order to reduce the thicknesses to compensate for the heavier chassis and still maintain at least 250kg of cargo payload.

Payload capacity can be contentious issue due to the various ways companies measure it. Variations may be with or without driver; with or without a passenger and half or a full tank of fuel. If the

van has two or even three (fully clothed and PPE equipped) people in the cab (say 200-300kg) while a full tank of fuel – say 80 litres of diesel – adds a further 70kg. Add these in and there may be very little left over for carrying anything in the back, such as tools and equipment...

In the past it was a rare occurrence to be pulled over in the UK by the police or VOSA for a weight inspection. But improved technology and computerised DVLA information and databases such as OCRS (Operator Compliance Risk Score) and VOSA's WIMS (Weigh-in-Motion Sensors) system, combined with cameras and the Automated Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) can weigh and crosscheck the vehicle against its specification. It can also quickly determine whether the operator/major manufacturer is a persistent overweight offender.



*Isoli offers a 1,000 volt insulated basket option to its MPT140*



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The new 14 metre Socage platform mounted on an Isuzu D-Max pick-up.

Operators must therefore be increasingly vigilant of the total weight of the vehicle, including extras such as tools and equipment. The driver, if stopped, can be fined on the spot and the overweight vehicle impounded. The maximum fine a court can impose is currently £5,000.

We have also heard rumours about a two locations where a system is being trailed that identifies and weighs the vehicle when stopped at traffic lights – although this has yet to be confirmed – so be warned!

The most popular application for the 3.5 tonne GVW van mount is street

lighting and CCTV work where there is little heavy equipment to carry so a few hundred kilos payload is more than sufficient. For heavier construction tasks, operators should look towards a five tonne vehicle which typically provides around 1,200kg of spare payload. One thing is sure, VOSA in the UK is putting more effort into enforcing vehicle weights and the number of checks and fines are sure to increase.

Since 1997, driving licence restrictions have also had an increasing influence on the specification of the 3.5 tonne

vehicle, with younger drivers not allowed to drive the heavier vehicles on a standard driving licence without additional (expensive) training.

### Smaller chassis

Perhaps with this in mind and also catering for tight, inner city operation, there are several manufacturers that are mounting platforms on even lighter chassis. Versalift has its lightweight XS range offering a GVW from 2,900kg with vehicles such as the Vauxhall Vivaro. These are designed primarily for one-man operation without the

use of stabilisers and have the added flexibility of an articulating fly jib. Because of the very narrow streets in their historic town centres, the Italian manufacturers have always produced such compact machines. At SIAE 2008 in Bologna, Benellgru showed an interesting platform mounted on a 2.2 tonne chassis. Developed in conjunction with truck manufacturer Piaggio, the tiny machine has a 14 metre working height with 120kg platform capacity and utilises a twin telescopic base section boom with telescopic upper.



Italian manufacturers have an affinity with compact truck mounts. Benellgru showed this 14 metre platform on a 2.2 tonne chassis at Saie 2008

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However this is by no means the smallest chassis used as a platform.

Gardner Denver which has a wide range of both telescopic and articulated van mounted platforms also has three lightweight units, ranging from the diminutive VM8.75 which offers an 8.75 metre working height with 120kg capacity and has a GVW of just 1,550kg.

A similar chassis is used for the Skyhigh VM1100 capable of up to 11 metres working height and 200kg platform capacity, while the pickup mounted Skyhigh VM120 which has a GVW of 2,850kg offers a 12.5 metre working height.

Hull-based Aldercote also offers a range of lightweight models from 1,550kg including the Aldercote

on a road show to customers.

Fellow Italian Isoli has a similar 14 metre model already in production, but has recently added a 1,000 volt insulated platform option to its MPT140.

The lift offers a 14.3 metres working height with unrestricted outreach of just over six metres with 200kg platform capacity. It can be mounted on a range of vehicles - including a Nissan Cabstar Iveco, Mercedes, Ford Transit, Renault - and the 1,250 x 710 x 1,100mm GRP basket includes 180 degrees platform rotation. All on a vehicle with an overall length of under five metres and an overall width - over the stabilisers - of less than 2.2 metres. GVW for this version is



*BT is a significant user of van mounted platforms - these have been supplied by Versalift*

naturally a little higher at 3,000kg, allowing the fitment of generously sized storage compartments.

### Buy or refurbish?

Every owner looking to replace a van mounted platform goes through the dilemma of whether to buy new or refurbish the older machine. However for a full, good quality refurbishment the cost savings may only be in the region of 30 percent. The amount saved does depend on the level of the refurbishment of course but when done properly, the cost difference means that most opt for a new vehicle.

### Electric?

There is huge interest in the whole environmentally friendly electric vehicles sector, however it does take a while before the interest turns into purchases. Now that battery life/range and size have reached acceptable levels, an electric van mount is a viable option, particularly for inner city working. Versalift is leading the

way in this area and can offer retro fit battery packs or new semi and all-electric van mounts.

Its first all-electric vehicle was produced in conjunction with Scottish and Southern Energy based on the Smiths (SEV) chassis cab. Versalift says SSE is pleased with the vehicle's performance working in Southampton's inner city environment on street lighting and hanging baskets. Chassis options are growing and include Peugeot Boxer and the futuristic Modec truck as seen at Vertikal Days. Expensive when new, these vehicles offer silent and pollution-free operation but still have a long pay-back period.

Despite the effect of the PFI contracts, sales in the UK are likely to bounce back to the more usual levels as the 'economic buying constipation' eases. When that will be, no-one quite knows.....

*Inside the futuristic all -electric Modec chassis van mounted platform*



PA95 which offers a working height of 9.5 metres and 5.4 metres outreach with 120kg capacity on a 2,800kg GVW chassis without the use of stabilisers.

Rapidly expanding Italian truck mounted and spider lift manufacturer Socage has also just announced a new 14 metre aerial lift mounted on an Isuzu D-Max pickup. The new Socage A314 was first seen at Bauma on a Land Rover chassis designed and built in conjunction with Cumberland Industries of the UK.

The Isuzu's pick up rear bodywork remains unchanged, with the platform fitting within the overall length of the standard vehicle which, according to Socage, also provides some decent load capacity. The vehicle includes a 136hp turbo diesel engine and full four-wheel drive with traction control. The first two units of this new model will be ready at the end of the summer and will then go out

## Expanding despite the recession

**Hull-based Aldercote designs and manufactures a wide range of van mounted lifts with working heights from 8.5 to 16.5 metres including both fixed boom and telescopic models. Formed in 2001 the company has an experienced management team and uses the latest design and manufacturing technology tools.**

After sales care is very important in the van mounted platform sector so

flexible warranty procedures are in place and this means working with customers to formulate a policy that suits his operational needs and keeps downtime to a minimum. The platforms are designed using many common components and parts. Recent innovations include a space saving column for greater access in the load area, outreach extension for one man operation, jack-less operation, chassis isolation to

protect ground workers should the booms touch an electric cable, battery powered platforms and a diagnostic system which monitors the condition and usage of the platform.

With increasing interest in its products from overseas buyers the company is in discussion with several interested companies wishing to sell its products in their home markets. Alongside the platform manufacturing, Aldercote has a bodybuilding division to fit shelving and racking to the inside of the van.

In the current economic climate it has also expanded its other activities, including re-mounting and refurbishment, specialist vehicle conversions, fibreglass moulding and commercial vehicle servicing and repair.



*The new space saving column*

