Executive Interview With Howard Laster, Head Of Aftermarket - NAFTA, Continental Commercial Vehicles & Aftermarket

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In today’s AMN Executive Interview we hear from Howard Laster, head of Aftermarket – NAFTA, Continental Commercial Vehicles & Aftermarket (CVAM). In the interview, Laster talks about the burgeoning TPMS market and Continental’s role in this product category with its VDO REDI-Sensor product line. In the interview, Laster shares what he sees as the biggest challenges and opportunities within TPMS sensor replacement today.

Continental is a leader in the TPMS category with its VDO REDI-Sensor. The company recently introduced an installer kit to assist shops with TPMS service. Please tell us about the new kit, how the idea came about and why you saw a need in the marketplace for this.

One of the most common complaints we hear from shop owners is the frustrating service bay tie-ups they deal with while waiting for a TPMS part to be delivered.

Needless to say, not being able to complete the vehicle work because of a tire service slows productivity, cuts profitability and hurts customer relations. We created our new VDO REDI-Sensor Installer Kit to alleviate this problem. We have also an advanced version for shops that do a higher service volume. This one includes four each of the three sensor part numbers and 16 service kits. We chose the tackle box idea because we felt it would give repair shops or professional installers an opportunity to better organize their TPMS supplies and encourage them to stock up on the specific SKUs they would need to maximize their TPMS business.

When compared to the potential loss of revenue and customer confidence created by service delays, the investment in our REDI-Sensor Installer Kit is minimal and well worth it, and the ROI is fast because REDI-Sensor keeps the shop in the game. With REDI-Sensor, the shops get a ready-to-use, multi-application sensor that works with all their major TPMS scan tools. And, programming or cloning because REDI-Sensor is a “plug-and-play” sensor data and diagnostic trouble codes (DTCs) that are stored in the vehicle ECU. Since TPMS is a key safety item, why should shops take a risk with their customer or their business’ reputation by taking a shortcut?

Our REDI-Sensor Kit is offered in two versions. The starter version comes with one each of the three sensor part numbers and four sensor service kits designed for use with REDI-Sensor. We also have an advanced version for shops that do a higher service volume. This one includes four each of the three sensor part numbers and 16 service kits. We chose the tackle box idea because we felt it would give repair shops or professional installers an opportunity to better organize their TPMS supplies and encourage them to stock up on the specific SKUs they would need to maximize their TPMS business.

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The response to our kit concept has been excellent, and we are very delighted with the results.

Training is critical when it comes to a relatively new product category such as TPMS. What kind of training support do you offer customers?

At Continental, we’ve taken a dedicated, multi-prong approach to training with a focus on promoting proper maintenance through the entire supply chain from the distributor to the automotive specialist.

We’ve combined a professional technical support and technical training department with a myriad of educational resources such as training videos, seminars, learning forums and technical presentations. In fact, we were just recognized for having the industry’s best business-to-business training videos by a major aftermarket organization. But you will have to wait until AAPEX, when the award is official, to learn more.

TPMS is all about safety and it’s a complex subject. Our job is to simplify it. Part of that we accomplished with the VDO REDI-Sensor program. The other part is helping our customers deal with issues they face every day, such as application confusion, parts proliferation and a misunderstanding of the fundamentals and terminology used in TPMS.

Many companies are utilizing YouTube as a channel to reach customers with training and product information. Do you find this to be a successful channel for reaching your customers?

YouTube serves as a great venue to get the message across to today’s market and we are utilizing the channel to get all of our training out there and readily accessible to the market. YouTube is a great tool that makes it easy to share our automotive expertise and knowledge with all of our customers. All of the videos we have developed are getting lots of views by installers, automotive specialists and enthusiasts daily, and this is giving them a better understanding of TPMS products, installation procedures and other key topics.

What are you seeing as the biggest concerns or challenges with servicing/replacing TPMS sensors?

A problem that we recognize in the TPMS service industry as a whole is doing the job right. In some cases, installers are receiving improper instructions from some sensor manufacturers to skip important installation procedures in an effort to save time. The vehicle relaim procedure is a good example. When you are replacing any TPMS sensor, performing the relaim procedure as required by the OE vehicle manufacturer is a critical component of the job. If this procedure is skipped, the risk of comeback increases dramatically.

Completing a successful relaim procedure, assures the installer that not only is the replacement sensor functioning properly, but also the entire TPMS system, for example removing old sensor data and diagnostic trouble codes (DTCs) that are stored in the vehicle ECU. Since TPMS is a key safety item, why should shops take a risk with their customer or their business’ reputation by taking a shortcut?

What other product categories are getting the most attention at Continental lately? Where is the company’s focus these days?

Although we continue to maintaining our strong position in the electric motors and door systems market with our OE-quality blower motors, engine cooling fan motors, fan assemblies, window lift motors, regulators and door lock actuators; we are concentrating additional efforts on expanding our portfolio of engine management and fuel supply products. From fuel modules to fuel injectors, to mass air flow sensors and electronic throttle bodies, Continental sets standards in quality and innovation.

Our most recent innovative technology is the very successful VDO REDI-Sensor. It was designed by our own Continental OE engineers and produced in our own manufacturing facilities. We are continuously evaluating the new technologies being developed by our OEM business units and investigating the possibilities they can bring to our aftermarket operations. Unlike most aftermarket companies, we are extremely fortunate to possess the cutting-edge technologies, new ideas and world-renowned in-house experts at our fingertips. The future is the core of the Continental program.

AAPEX is just around the corner. What does the company have planned for this year’s show?

Continental will be at both AAPEX and SEMA. All of the products in our aftermarket portfolio will be on display at AAPEX, along with the ContiSys Check Service Tool, a new addition to our portfolio under the VDO brand in the Diagnostics and Services group. At SEMA, we will be exhibiting to two different markets. Our SEMA booth in the Global Tire Expo will focus on TPMS, while our booth in Hot Rod Alley will reach out to the automotive and truck enthusiast crowd with a focus on gauges, camera systems and accessories. We also will be conducting a technical presentation on TPMS Smart Maintenance and Repair as part of the AAPEX 2013 Learning Forum and participating at SEMA in the Tire Industry Association’s TPMS at 10.

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