



WILL AUTONOMOUS TRUCKS BE DISPOSABLE TRUCKS?

Autonomous trucks may log as many as three times the mileage that today's long-haul rigs do. Will there be a secondary market for three-year-old trucks with a million miles on them?

At the NACFE Autonomous Trucks Summit in Indianapolis, IN, ahead of the Indy Autonomous Challenge in October, Bill Brentar, retired director of maintenance for UPS and a current NACFE consultant, made an interesting point. During a panel discussion, he noted that currently, industry experts predict that autonomous trucks will log as many as three times the annual miles as conventional long-haul tractor-trailers do.

Today, fleets expect to put about 100,000 miles per year on a truck in those applications. And, experts say, given that autonomous trucks won't need to worry about Hours of Service regulations and can pretty much run around the clock, stopping only for fuel, maintenance and loading or unloading freight, they could put as many as 300,000 miles per year on their odometers in fleet operations.

Brentar's immediate point was that this will mean an exponential uptick in fleet maintenance operations, since the trucks will be running on accelerated maintenance schedules and going through consumable components such as tires, belts and engine

fluids at three times the rate they do today.

But then, someone in the audience asked an obvious question: What about the secondary truck market? Would anyone want to buy a three-year-old truck with almost 1 million miles on it? Particularly a truck that might have few, if any, amenities onboard for a human driver?

“ When it comes to autonomous trucks, will OEMs opt to build and market them as vehicles with only one life and place emphasis on making them as green as possible during that one life?

This question spurred a lively debate — and we won't know what the market demand for used autonomous trucks will be for several years. But it did remind me of a point made by industry analyst Sandeep Kar about a decade ago, before autonomous trucks were on anybody's radar screen.

At the time, Kar was looking at emerging



economies around the world, and theorized that OEMs would start to develop true, one-life, “disposable” trucks for these markets. These trucks would be built to be run hard for a set number of years, traded-in once they were used up, with their various parts and components either being reengineered for the aftermarket parts market, or cut up as scrap and recycled as a brand-new, single-use, disposable truck. These would be “green” trucks, in every sense of the word; Kar argued: tough, low-cost to purchase and operate and completely recyclable once their service lives were done.

And I couldn’t help but wonder if that ultimately might be how OEMs approach dedicated, Level 5, autonomous trucks once they enter the market. Assuming there’s no need for any sort of human amenities

onboard the truck, and a limited secondary market for used trucks with that many miles on them, it is quite possible that OEMs will elect to build and market these as one-life commercial vehicles and place an emphasis on making them as green as possible.

Such a truck might be an enticing prospect for fleets and OEMs alike. It will be awhile before we know. It’s just one example of how massively autonomous technology could transform the trucking industry just a few short years from now.

About the Author: Jack Roberts is a transportation journalist who has been covering North American commercial vehicles for 25 years and has developed a reputation as a leading authority/futurist concentrating on new trucking technology, including autonomous vehicles, battery-electric trucks and emerging blockchain technology.



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