

Driving Down Fuel Costs for Business with Mid-Size Fleets

BY ERIC REEVES

As companies with mid-size fleets watch gas and diesel prices continue to skyrocket, they continue to be concerned with controlling costs. While those who oversee fleet operations within their companies may have no control over crude oil prices, state environmental regulations, or sales tax on gas pumps, there are steps they can take to keep their fuel costs at a manageable level.

Fleet managers agree there are simple things businesses can do to help keep fuel costs down. For example, driving wisely and maintaining vehicles on a routine basis go along way in improving mileage and increasing efficiencies. Fleet managers often recommend talking to company drivers about driving habits because it can make a big difference in the long run.

The following are just a few:

Go easy on the brakes and gas pedal. Avoid “jackrabbit” starts by accelerating gradually whenever possible. Also anticipate stops to avoid sudden braking.

Slow down. You can improve your gas mileage about 15 percent by driving at 55 mph rather than 65 mph.

Avoid long idles. Turn off the engine if you anticipate a long wait time. Idling burns more gas than restarting the engine (two minutes is generally the balance between how much fuel is used idling compared to the amount of fuel required to restart the vehicle).

Keep tires properly inflated and aligned. Periodic wheel alignments and keeping tires inflated to your vehicle’s recommended pressure can improve gas mileage.

Get regular engine tune-ups and car maintenance checks. Tune-ups improve performance, as well as gas mileage. Check your owner’s manual for recom-

mended maintenance schedules. By following the manufacturer’s recommendations, you should avoid fuel economy problems due to worn spark plugs, dragging brakes, low transmission fluid, or the transmission not going into gear.

Check your vehicle’s air filter regularly. A dirty air filter can also adversely affect gas mileage.

Another way to manage fluctuating fuel costs is to implement a fuel card program that enables business owners to track the cost of fuel for all drivers in the company, and do so in a way that is efficient and timely.

For example, businesses using Enterprise Fleet Services’ fuel card program receive a separate ID number for each driver, a number that is immediately recorded electronically at the point of fuel purchase. Drivers carry a single card to purchase their fuel and have access to more fueling locations than any individual retailer’s card. At the end of the month, the fleet manager receives one report that tracks all fuel purchases. Because the program provides detailed information about each driver and the vehicle in one easy-to-read report, as well as exception reports that help pinpoint unauthorized purchases, companies are better able to control costs while giving their drivers maximum convenience.

Businesses often say their fuel card program is one of the best features of their fleet management program because it helps them control fuel costs and still gives their drivers maximum convenience. In addition, it significantly reduces their fuel costs, and records mileage each time the card is used, which helps them monitor maintenance and repairs on all of their vehicles.

Another common question is whether diesel or gasoline is more efficient.

When it comes to fuel economy, diesel fuel generally has the advantage because there is more energy in a gallon of diesel fuel than a gallon of gasoline. In other words, a diesel engine can make more power with less fuel than a gasoline engine. Results can vary, but drivers can typically achieve 12 – 75 percent better fuel economy by switching from gasoline to diesel power. Also, due to a diesel engine’s ability to vary its air/fuel ratio, very little fuel is used to idle, (about 1/3 of a gasoline engine), so vehicles that must idle for long periods of time make excellent candidates for diesel power.

But for initial cost and short-term maintenance, gasoline has the advantage because the higher compression and tighter tolerances needed to ignite diesel fuel require the engine be designed and built with greater weight and strength, which generally makes them more expensive. ▽

Enterprise Fleet Services, a division of Enterprise Rent-A-Car, is a full-service fleet management company for businesses with mid-size fleets. With 51 fully staffed offices nationwide, it supplies most makes and models of cars, light and medium duty trucks and service vehicles to businesses.

In addition to winning the 2006 American Business Award for Best Support Organization, Enterprise has been recognized with the Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) “Blue Seal of Excellence” award for nine consecutive years, an industry record. For more information, visit the company’s website at www.enterprise.com/fleets or call toll free 877-23-FLEET.