



Can he  
fix it?

Not half

*Bob the Builder and Barack Obama are seldom among the names cropping up in Commercial Vehicle Engineer. Both did, funnily enough, in an interview with the man who for the past year has been managing director of the commercial vehicles division of Mercedes-Benz UK.*

*The explanation reveals much about Michael Kamper's distinctive management style. Tim Blakemore reports.*

Perched incongruously amid a small collection of Mercedes vehicle scale models and various engine bits and pieces on a shelf in Michael Kamper's Milton Keynes office is a bright yellow toy telephone from the Bob the Builder merchandise collection, instantly recognisable to the millions of young children who are fans of the hugely successful eponymous BBC tv series. But why on earth, when his son grew out of the Bob the Builder phase, did Kamper decide to bring the discarded toy to work rather than take it to a charity shop? It is not hard to imagine a less polite version of just such a question going through the minds of bemused Mercedes-Benz UK managers at the first meeting where Kamper showed up and calmly placed the toy phone on the table in front of him, next to his iPad, pen and notebook. They didn't have to wait long for the answer. When Kamper decided the time had come for the meeting to move on from an unproductive

discussion on a problem seemingly regarded as insoluble by some of the managers present he punched the Bob the Builder keypad and out came the cheery tones of Neil Morrissey chirping: "Can we fix it? Yes we can."

The message could hardly have been more clear: not only is Kamper a far cry from the stereotypical, rather humourless German executive that some might have imagined their new boss to be, but at the same time he is deadly serious about the can-do approach to business he wants to see from the entire Mercedes-Benz UK commercial vehicles operation.

The point is underlined by John Baker, the former Mercedes-Benz UK truck sales and marketing director, now retired, who was responsible thirteen years ago for recruiting Kamper to his first Mercedes job in the UK, as truck marketing manager. Baker had met Kamper a few times previously in meetings of what then was a

DaimlerChrysler international truck marketing group. Kamper had been representing the German domestic truck market but Baker recalls how his naturally international outlook

**Plugging a gap: the Citan is preferred to other small vans by GBN Services of London, now running an all-Mercedes truck and van fleet.**

shone through and how he was “not your archetypal German.” This is where the US presidential connection comes in, and there’s more to it than the famous Obama campaigning “Yes, we can” catchphrase. Kamper, 47, was an officer in the German navy before starting his career with Daimler. Between 1979 and 1982, as part of an exchange scheme with the US navy, he worked in the US at its Naval Academy, living with an American family. This not only helped lay the foundations for his international outlook on business but also gave him his first real chance to hone English language skills that have served him well ever since. “Total immersion does it for you,” Kamper now recalls. Many a time since then he has had good cause to appreciate the value of that total immersion in English (albeit the North American variety), not least in the late 1990s when he represented the German domestic market in a Daimler international truck marketing team set up by Daniel Coppens, the Belgian who then headed Mercedes global truck sales and marketing. “I was the only individual in the German domestic market then with a halfway sound command of English,” remembers Kamper.

Coppens is credited with having played a crucial role in a significant five-year turn-around of the Mercedes truck business, from heavy losses in 1993 to healthy profitability in 1998. But this is not the only reason why Kamper fondly remembers the Belgian who subsequently left Daimler to work for Volkswagen and now runs his own management consultancy. Coppens treated traditional corporate structures with an irreverence that some of the old-guard Mercedes managers must have found hard to swallow at the time. And he had a healthy scepticism for much of the information he was fed through official channels. More than a little of this unconventional management style evidently has rubbed off on Kamper. “Daniel Coppens was quite a revolutionary,” he says. “He passionately believed that once you reach a certain level in a company, such as vice president, people try to overwhelm you daily with PowerPoint presentations. And everybody’s cheating and lying. He wasn’t prepared to put up with this. So he put in place an operational group of people who would meet regularly under the umbrella of ‘best practice forum’. They would talk about product launches, best-practice initiatives, the activities of competitors and campaigns. Coppens would casually join the group for dinner or maybe just drop in unexpectedly in the afternoon. His purpose was to find out the unfiltered version of what was happening in the markets and on the streets.”

Just like Coppens, Kamper is determined to base his decisions not on rumour or hearsay but on hard, accurate data. Typical engineer, I hear you say. Right enough, so it comes as a bit of a



surprise when Kamper confesses, with a hint of regret, that he has no formal engineering qualification. But he more than makes up for that with practical experience. One post in particular he remembers for the “breadth of insight it gave me into how the company works.” He returned to Germany from the UK in 2003 to become European sales director for Daimler “special vehicles”, including Unimog in Germany initially, then for the whole of western Europe and eventually for Econic municipal vehicles as well, or “bin lorries” as he likes to call them. In this job Kamper reported to Martin Daum, subsequently promoted to his current job as president and chief executive of Daimler Trucks North America, and the experience stays with him because of the insight it gave into the whole Daimler operation. He explains exactly what he means by likening most jobs, even quite senior ones, to being like a gearwheel in a large transmission. “You are privy only to a narrow spectrum of topics,” he says. “Special vehicles is like a microcosm of the whole business. If your forecast on order intake is inaccurate, you soon start laying off people. This may sound simplistic but you don’t actually learn such lessons unless you are physically on the same premises. At special vehicles on a monthly basis you put on your dark suit and confess, then talk about an objective order intake for the next quarter. The head of logistics is there, asking how many Econic doors he needs to source. The head of production is there too, and he has to decide whether or not to put on an additional shift on Saturday, or whether to lay off people or extend shifts for 50 minutes to be able to fulfil that Zetros (military vehicle) order. This is where I learned how the company works. It’s a full 360-degree circle in terms of customer-facing, order generation, forecasting, interfacing with the assembly facility, logistics and production and the delivery process. Oh yes, and not forgetting to check also that payment from customers arrives on time. On top of all this there is substantial input into product development, based on discussions with customers.”

After a little more than three years in the special vehicles division, Kamper was promoted to international key account director for the entire Mercedes-Benz global truck division, reporting to head of sales Ulrich Bastert. Then last spring came the call inviting him to apply for the UK commercial vehicle division managing director’s job, filling the vacancy created by the controversial departure of Ian Jones, described by Kamper as “my ex-boss, supporter and friend.”

The whole UK truck market has been through quite some turmoil since Kamper was last here. I wonder what has surprised him most about it in the past twelve months. As if to underline his natural affinity to engineers and engineering disciplines, Kamper’s unexpected response is to quote a German executive for whom he has “great respect”. That person

**Going full-circle: Kamper spent three years in the Mercedes “special vehicles” division, including huge successes like the Econic, in action here in West Suffolk.**





is Hartmut Mehdorn, who currently runs the organisation behind Berlin's airport but who made his name as boss of the huge Deutsche Bahn railway and logistics group after starting his career at Focke-Wulf, an aircraft manufacturer. Mehdorn's stock retort to crass questions about surprises was: "I'm an engineer by trade. Any kind of surprise is bad, whether it's good news or bad news."

But Kamper is too polite to leave his answer at that. "I've been positively surprised by the consistency and continuity in our customer-facing personnel," he says. "I believe this is a real asset. About a dozen years ago one of the perceived weaknesses of the Mercedes-Benz UK team was that our customer-facing staff turnover was far too high. We've effectively overcome this by building long-standing relationships with our customer base through the dealer network and the Mercedes-Benz UK team. I don't differentiate between these two groups, by the way. For me they are all part of the Mercedes-Benz UK sales and marketing family, whether they are dealer employed or Mercedes-Benz employed."

The addition last year of the Citan van (a Mercedes version of the Renault Kangoo) to the Mercedes commercial vehicle range means that this family has an exceptionally wide range of vehicle types to deal with, from car-like light vans to 44-tonne trucks and above. Does this not create some exceptional sales and marketing difficulties, not least when it comes to motivating dealers and their staff to sell low-value lightweight vans when they could be spending their time on more profitable heavy trucks?

"I wouldn't call them difficulties, rather different qualities of challenge," Kamper smiles, before getting a wee bit more serious. "I genuinely believe we have an asset in the form of a dedicated commercial vehicle network which no competitor can match. Even if you look at Mercedes-Benz in the whole of Europe, the UK situation is unique. I'm very fortunate to have a dedicated cv only network." He concedes that the Citan "lends itself to retail sales, so some significant effort was needed to train the sales force." But he seems genuinely convinced that this effort will pay off in the long run, even though there is precious little sign in the latest registration figures from The Society of Motor



**Michael Kamper: "Watch this space for the second half of the year."**

***New Actros: delivering on its promises at Euro 5 in the UK, and at Euro 6 in several continental markets already.***

Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) of Citan sales really beginning to take off. And some critics say that it is unlikely ever to do so while its prices remain so much higher than those of its main rivals, including the Renault Kangoo from which it is cloned. On the question of whether or not independent dealers have any choice when it comes to selling and servicing Citan, Kamper's answer is characteristically polite but unequivocal nonetheless. "Our partners are franchised to sell and service light commercial vehicles and trucks," he says.

"More specifically our dealer partners are franchised to sell Fuso Canter and Mercedes-Benz lcv and hgv and to service all those products. This is not a cherry-picking exercise. But I believe the entire dealer community welcomes the opportunity of having an enhanced model line-up (from the addition of the Citan) giving access to 35 per cent of the market that wasn't previously accessible. That didn't create any issues. It takes a slight shift of focus for lcv management at a retail level. But it will bring downstream revenues in workshop hours and parts sales that previously weren't there. The key to long-term profitability is to increase the size of our footprint and dealer footprints. So it's all good news."

On the face of it, there is less good news for him in the latest SMMT statistics on the UK's six-tonnes-plus truck market. These show that Mercedes is holding on to second place, but with market share falling and Scania, despite being confined only to 16 tonnes and above, snapping at its heels. How does Kamper plan to respond to this? The answer takes us back to his determination to base decisions only on an in-depth understanding of what the numbers are saying. "What you see in the current registration statistics is not an accurate reflection of the true performance you are about to see," he says. "Mercedes-Benz finished last year with a six-tonnes-plus market share in the UK of 16.3 per cent. Our year-to-date market share so far this year is clearly below that. But look at the true driver of what is going to happen in 2013, an odd one out for all the reasons we understand. The biggest issue is going to be the transition from Euro 5 to Euro 6. A typical year is biased in truck registrations 40/60 between the first and second halves. My expectation is that 2013 will be even more heavily biased towards the second half. Right now (end of June) only 17,600 trucks have been registered. Multiply that by two and you would conclude that the truck market this year will total 35,000. It's not going to be 35,000 but somewhere between 40,000 and 42,000, depending on 2013's second anomaly: the volume of Euro 5 trucks earmarked for derogation."

Kamper admits that there is still "an element of uncertainty" about how many trucks will take advantage of this Euro 5 derogation but he is in no doubt that Mercedes truck registrations are set to boom between now and the end of this year.

"Even if I remove the derogation element from our customer order bank at present, our order intake now is some 70 per cent up on the same period last year," he says. "So watch this space for the second half of the year."

Kamper concedes that UK operator demand for Euro 6 trucks continues to be "microscopic" but he is philosophical about this, pointing out that throughout Europe there are now more than 20,000 Euro 6 Mercedes trucks in operation. "We have been working on the assumption that the fuel consumption of a Euro 6 Actros would be around 4.5 per cent better than that of a Euro 5 Actros or Axor," he says. "But every dealer-based demo vehicle here is far outperforming that as we speak. Our fuel economy at Euro 6 is on average between 5.5 and six per cent better than at Euro 5." □

