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The pressure is on: Selling TPMS tools

More than 1.7 billion TPMS sensors have been on the road since 2008 — are you selling tools to service them?

Selling new technology is difficult.

There are many reasons people resist change. Jumping in on new technology can come with a big price tag, a steep learning curve and a slow return on investment. And often the best features don't surface until the second or third generation. (Think home video technology.)

But new tools mean new sales for you. So, you should get in on the bottom floor before the competition does. Staying ahead of the curve makes you the go-to-guy (or gal) for new stuff.

TPMS (Tire Pressure Monitoring Systems) are one of those new technologies. Actually, TPMS isn't new. It's been an option on high-end European cars since the 1980s. And in the U.S., TPMS has been mandated on every car and light truck sold for the last eight years. But, what *is* new is independent shops have been seeing a strong stream of TPMS work the last few years.

If you don't actively promote TPMS tools yet, 2017 may be the year to jump on the bandwagon.

Q. Why is TPMS such a big deal?

A. First, the backstory: In the late 1990s, there were over 100 vehicle rollover fatalities attributed to underinflated tires, which forced a major tire manufacturer

to recall. This led the U.S. Congress to create the TREAD Act in late 2000. TREAD mandated a phased-in rollout of TPMS sensors on all consumer vehicles. Since 2008, TPMS has been required on every vehicle sold in the U.S.

There have been more than 1.7 billion TPMS sensors on the road since 2008 (one on each of the four tires), estimates Harlan Siegel, vice president of TPMS tool manufacturer Launch Tech USA. Each of those sensors requires a TPMS tool to be properly serviced. That's where you come in.

Over the last two years, TPMS tools have had strong year-over-year sales increases of nearly 33 percent. Buyers for the mobile tool distribution market are forecasting more of the same—or even better growth in 2017.

"This is the first year (2016) tire dealers are reporting that sales of TPMS sensors by percentage were higher than sales of valve stems and cores," says Michael Flink, national trainer for Autel. "So we finally have seen that tilting point where TPMS ... is more common than the traditional side."

Q. How does a TPMS sensor work?

A. Here's my crude layman's explanation: A TPMS sensor is like a tiny radio station, usually

mounted behind the valve, inside the tire. It broadcasts tire information and a unique ID code. To conserve battery life, the sensor sleeps a lot.

These periodic broadcasts are picked up by one or more modules in the vehicle that only listen to sensors with IDs they have been programmed to read. This keeps your car from reading the tire pressure of the vehicle next to it at a stoplight, says Flink.

If any tire sensor reports it's underinflated (usually by 25 percent or more), a dashboard light is triggered to alert the driver to check tire pressure. Some systems even indicate which tire is low.

Most sensors have a battery life of about eight to 10 years. Since most batteries are not replaceable, the entire sensor must be replaced and reprogrammed when the sensor battery fails.

After tire replacements or rotations, the system needs to be updated to "re-learn" sensor locations.

This all requires a TPMS tool.

Q. What does the TPMS tool do?

A. Different TPMS tools perform different functions. Here are some of the most common:

Gather Info—The most basic TPMS tool will wake the sleeping sensor and gather

Next month
Need a visual? Sasso covers tips and tricks for proper merchandising and product placement on the truck. Look for more in next month's Sales Q&A column.

TPMS TOOLS



Launch Tech
TSAP-1 universal TPMS activation
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Bartec USA
Tech500 Master Kit
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information. As the user walks around the vehicle and pauses at each wheel, the sensor will transmit readings. Indirect sensors only tell the tire pressure. Direct sensors can send other data like battery level, tire temperature, sensor ID and more diagnostic information.

Clear The Mil—Most TPMS tools will activate the sensor so it sends a message to the module to clear the Malfunction Indicator Lamp (MIL). Unlike a "check engine" light, a TPMS MIL will not clear until a sensor indicates the tire is acceptably inflated. Without a tool, a vehicle must be driven for an indeterminate period of time to clear a TPMS MIL.

Re-Learn Function—Some TPMS tools can teach the module where sensors are after a tire replacement or rotation. This function can also be done by some scan tools.

Clone Or Program A Sensor—More advanced tools will take a "programmable" TPMS sensor and either clone it to match an existing sensor or program it to work with the vehicle. Note that not all "universal" sensors work on all vehicles, and not all tools can clone or program all sensors. So, it's important to help your customers determine what tool is best for their needs.

Asking questions can help you suggest the best tool. Leading manufacturers of TPMS tools to the mobile dealer market are ATEQ, Autel, Bartec and, most recently, Launch.

Q. What kind of shops need a TPMS tool?

A. Any shop that touches a tire should have a TPMS tool. That means any shop that works on tires, brakes or rims needs a TPMS tool. But also consider fleet garages, quick lube shops and even car washes that rotate tires.

Anyone doing tire rotations needs a TPMS tool, Flink says.

"Most of the TPMS systems today identify the tire that's low when the MIL light comes on," Flink says. "So, when you rotate tires, you need to relearn the locations of the tire [with a TPMS tool]."

When you stop at general repair shops, look around. If you see a tire machine or wheel balancer, you should talk to the shop owner and techs about TPMS tools.

Also, don't forget body shops. They are commonly overlooked, says Flink. But if a vehicle is in a wreck and the tires and/or wheels are damaged, they will require a new sensor and a tool to relearn/clone the tire position.

And don't think you're selling just one TPMS tool per shop. High-volume shops could use multiple TPMS tools. Not every tech needs the most advanced tool, but technicians regularly servicing tires will often want their own TPMS tool to improve their productivity.

High-volume tire shops could easily use one TPMS tool for every bay.

Q. What is the best way to sell TPMS tools?

A. The best way is to show and sell. There are two kinds of demos for selling technical tools:

How-to Demo—This is basically a technical training session. It requires a lot of time and product knowledge. Basically, you are showing how to fix a car with the tool.

Advantages Demo—This is focused on the features and benefits. It is mostly about capabilities and comparisons. It requires knowledge of key features, not product use experience.

You don't need to do how-to demos to sell TPMS tools, Launch's Siegel says.

"I have a friend who is in orthopedic surgical instrument sales—and he doesn't do surgery, I can tell you that right now," jokes Siegel. "He sells the features and benefits through asking questions. That's what he does. He asks open-ended questions to position the product."

But you have to have the tool on the truck, says Siegel. Actually, you need at least two TPMS tools: one to show and one to sell, because you can't afford to sell your demo unit, or you'll have nothing to show at your next stop. **PD**