

Still Adapting

By Hank Inman

As the global economy continues to affect businesses and industries, the tire industry continues to have its issues – albeit fewer of them – with tire pressure monitoring systems, especially in the service bay area.

Mandated by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, TPMS on OE passenger cars are now into their second model year of full compliance. That means service shops should be getting more accustomed to dealing with the systems and their related issues, right? Wrong!

While not a total scientific analysis (but certainly as valid as most political voting exit polls), a random sampling of a few dealers and suppliers indicates all is not quiet on the TPMS front, and service issues remain at the top of most of their lists.

“Any service that requires my guys to dismount and mount tires can damage a TPMS unit,” bluntly stated Chris Mitsos, vice president of California-based Mountain View Tire & Service. “This includes new tire installation, flat repairs and any other mount/dismounts.”

Mitsos’ comments reflect the general attitude of the industry and its suppliers. While the TPMS technology is improving with each model year, and sensor and tool manufacturers continue to provide their customers with the proper equipment and support, working in the bay is a different story.

According to Mitsos, the most common and avoidable mistakes that happen in the service bays with tire pressure monitoring systems are:

- Inappropriate tool use
- Not replacing the nickel-plated valve core
- Not replacing the rubber grommet in the valve stem
- Ignorance – just use some common sense

Another issue that seems to be a common concern is the weather, specifically in the climates of the northern U.S.

“The weather affects the aluminum sensors quite a bit,” said Steve Yax of Tire Wholesalers Inc. in Troy, Mich. “They can oxidize on the inside, which has been a problem.”

Chris Batts, TPMS product manager for Wixom, Mich.-based K-Tool International, agrees with Yax. “But if you use the correct core – a nickel-plated valve core,” said Batts, “you won’t have problems.”

Batts said one solution to this ongoing issue is using a rubber stem, introduced by General Motors (and now used by Ford). “You should also use a rubber or aluminum cap to prevent galvanization,” he said. “The bottom line on all of these issues, though, is like anything in our business – education, education, education. It must be ongoing.”

Then there are the tools that are used in the bays to service TPMS-equipped vehicles. To supplement his common sense approach, Batts added, “When you’re in the service bay area, you’re not in a china shop. There are tools, metals, rubber and cars. It’s just a normal rugged environment. As with all things in an area like that, you’ve got to handle your equipment with care.”

With that in mind, Batts offered some recommendations of his own regarding the use of TPMS tools in the service bays.

- Take good care of your tools – protect them
- Keep them up to date
- Think about durability, too, when looking to purchase tools
- Keep the tools and surrounding area as clean as possible

Evolving Sensor Design

Regarding the sensors themselves, Orange Electronics believes technology is continuously improving. “As another year of aging vehicles forces many more consumers to replace worn out or damaged sensors, we are looking forward to 2009 being a very strong year for replacement TPMS sensors,” a spokesperson said.

In 2009, tire shops will need to make a decision on how they will treat TPMS as a regular part of their business,” Orange Electronics said.

“As the percentage of TPMS-equipped vehicles entering their shops increases, tire dealers will be forced to either embrace it; which means having in-stock replacement inventory, trigger tools to reset the systems and access to quick reset procedures, or face a possible irreversible loss of business to their competitors or the local auto dealership.”

Orange Electronics said that many OE sensors have carried over from 2008 into the 2009 model year. “This is good news to the industry as commonality will make it easier to service vehicles and help tire dealers that find the OE application information challenging.”

Another growth area for TPMS is in retrofit systems. “These have grown tremendously in popularity,” said Orange Electronics. “These systems provide real savings in fuel consumption, extended tire life and security and safety for the vehicle occupants.

“The drop in new vehicle sales in 2008 only adds to the number of older vehicles on the road that can benefit from this technology. As TPMS becomes more accepted, understood and wanted by consumers, the demand for low cost systems will increase.”

New TPMS Products

Orange Electronics’ P409S retrofit system seems to fit this particular mode. Users say they are affordable and install quickly and easily. “This is a great add-on sale for tire dealers, and further assures consumers that their tire dealer understands TPMS and the benefits that it brings,” said Orange.

Programmable sensors also continue to be an increasingly popular item stocked by dealers and distributors. “Orange continues to develop our programmable sensors for Asian vehicles that require ID registration,” the company said. “We introduced this technology at SEMA and it has been enthusiastically received by tire dealers. By programming a blank sensor, tire shops can bypass the registration process, which requires an expensive OBD relearn tool.”

The company said that it has application coverage for almost 50% of the vehicles equipped with OBD relearn systems and they expect to have 100% by the end of this year.

To address service bay issues involving import and domestic product and fitment knowledge, TIA unveiled its new Vehicle TPMS Relearn Chart at the 2008 SEMA Show.

The 17x11-inch spiral-bound chart is a must for any service technician. It includes all the information one needs to relearn any existing TPMS system. "It grew out of our 200-Level training program," said Sean MacKinnon, TIA's director of its automotive training department. "We started inputting information onto a spreadsheet and it mushroomed from there."

The guide/chart is comprehensive, easy to use and can be taken right to the vehicle. "It has been well received by not only our members, but some non-member groups, too," said MacKinnon. "Many have said that they have learned a lot about TPMS in general just from using the chart."

MacKinnon added that, in the interest of continuous improvement, TIA plans to unveil an electronic version of the chart in early February.



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