

# Moving up and out

By Mike Stock

Times may be tough but there's a buzz and a bustle at TCL Isuzu as it settles into its new headquarters in Auckland's East Tamaki industrial area

**T**CL, New Zealand's largest truck retailer, has moved south-east from its long-established Penrose base to the Stevenson Engineering site in Lady Ruby Drive, East Tamaki.

The commanding corner site also houses Stevenson's engineering base with specialised truck, heavy plant, welding, machining and hydraulic workshops. And that means that for the first time, TCL Isuzu has its own on-site workshop in Auckland.

Stevenson, a household name in the Auckland region, bought TCL last year, completing a two-pronged drive into



truck retailing and servicing.

It already had a European brand with Iveco and at the end of last year completed the purchase of TCL Isuzu, Master truck dealer for the country's leading brand.

Stevenson had been looking to acquire a top Japanese truck brand as part of a strategy to put several truck franchises under one roof.

Stevenson Engineering CEO, Tony Coombe, described the TCL purchase as "a milestone in building Stevenson Engineering's truck sales and service division". The transport portfolio also includes Feilding-based Fruehauf Trailers.

The deal also helped TCL to achieve a key goal of having its own pre-delivery and service workshop, allowing it to beef up the strong after-sales and customer-satisfaction focuses it regards as essential to doing good business.

Dealer Principal Mike Searle sees the on-site workshop as a crucial step in TCL Isuzu further developing its after-sales business.

He says having an on-site workshop



makes for better coordination between the sales and servicing teams.

"Being on-site with sales gives better lines of communication with the service department."

Previously, TCL used a network of independent service contractors dotted around Auckland. That worked well for years and the company will continue to work with outside service contractors.

"An operator on the North Shore, for instance, doesn't want to come all the way over to South Auckland to get a truck serviced."

But having its own workshop enables TCL to have better after-sales contact with customers.

"There's more dialogue and points of contact," New truck sales manager Chris Sansome says. "In our business, it's vital to have an understanding of what the customer wants."

That contact is backed up by the company's service engineer, who looks after trucks in their working environment and can assess how well the vehicle is performing its intended job and troubleshoot problems.

Sansome says the on-site workshop will also save time and cut costs in the new-truck pre-delivery process.

There'll be no more moving new trucks around between workshops and testing stations, and the five-strong sales staff can introduce new truck buyers to TCL's own service department, develop tailor-made service and maintenance packages and set up parts accounts.

TCL Isuzu has recently partnered with UDC to offer "in-house finance", which now gives it the ability support the customer from purchase, finance,

service and trading the vehicle back when it's due for replacement.

Sansome has been in the transport business all his working life. First with a leasing company in his native Britain and then in Europe with Volvo, before moving to New Zealand, and he brings his expertise of the high volume market.

Sales staff are all members of the Isuzu Technicians' Guild, and the company's service engineers are highly-trained and well-qualified.

"Working in the truck workshop are two of the leading Isuzu technicians in New Zealand, and one of them has been recognised by Isuzu New Zealand in the Technicians awards," says Sansome.

TCL also has a sales and service centre in Tauranga, aftersales manager Daryl Hone has been working with Isuzus for over 30 years.

"All of our guys are very highly trained and skilled in diagnosing faults, which is essential because of the development of electronics in modern trucks.

"Electronics are a fact of life, and our guys can diagnose electronic faults quickly. Customers might go to a non-authorised workshop where they could spend a day trying to find a fault that our guys might diagnose in less than an hour."

Searle says that being able to call on the expertise in the Stevenson Engineering workshop gives TCL another important string to its bow.

"We can do chassis modifications on-site."

TCL hasn't moved into truck body-building though. Customers for Japanese trucks – Isuzu sells light, medium and heavy trucks – have





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diverse requirements.

Some buyers want tipper bodies, some want flatbeds, others want refrigerated boxes, and some want curtain-siders.

Sansome feels that "it's better for bespoke bodywork manufacturers – and they're dotted all over the Auckland region – to do the work. It's highly specialised, and a firm that builds tipper bodies won't necessarily do fridges."

Sansome is enthusiastic about the fact that Isuzu has just launched a brand-new, state-of-the-art truck range in New Zealand. The six-month old Gen 6 range is marketed in N-Series light, F-Series medium and FX heavy variants.

They meet Euro 4 emission standards, all have ABS braking and ASR anti-slip systems and a driver's airbag.

In all F Series models driver comfort is enhanced by an air suspension seat with air-adjustable lumbar and side support and adjustable shock absorber. Air-conditioning is standard, as is a CD player, power windows and central door-locking.

But the feature Sansome sees as

the most significant is the automated manual transmission, which is an option in the N Series and 4x2 F Series model ranges.

The automated manual brings with it better fuel economy, lower maintenance costs and less wear-and-tear. Unlike a conventional automatic gearbox it doesn't sap engine power.

"You don't lose power or fuel economy as you do with a conventional auto, and the gearbox is cheaper to manufacture and maintain.

"And you can't burn a clutch out. It's got a torque converter that locks up at 10km/h. There's no opportunity to misuse or abuse the clutch."

Sansome has a ready fix for sceptics about automated manual gearboxes – let them try one out.

"One fleet customer couldn't see the value in paying a price premium for the automated manual but when we loaned them a demonstrator truck they saw the cost benefits."

He sees the Gen 6's newness and innovative technology as giving it a strong edge in the NZ truck market.

TCL Isuzu is already the country's biggest truck dealer and accounts for 50 percent of Isuzu's NZ sales. Last year the company retailed just short of 500 trucks – split roughly 40 percent light and 30 percent each for medium and heavy. That's around 12 percent of the total NZ market.

Though total 2009 sales are likely to be less because of the current tough economic climate, Sansome is upbeat about Isuzu's future.

He says the Gen 6 is only six-

months old, is environmentally-friendly and has high-tech features that keep operating costs low, improve efficiency and make for good driver ergonomics, safety and comfort.

Another development with the Stevenson Group is the UDC finance facility, which will enable customers to get finance on Isuzu, Iveco, used trucks and Fruehauf products.

And the new location and on-site workshop will also help TCL Isuzu consolidate. It is right in the middle of Auckland's major south-eastern transport and industrial hub, and the East Tamaki/Highbrook area is high-growth.

TCL Isuzu will be hosting its customers and suppliers in an open day at the end of May.

"They'll be able to look around the new site and see the extent of the Stevenson Engineering workshops.

"They can learn about the TCL brand and how it sits with the long-established Stevenson group." ■

