

Scottish Grocer hits the road with CJ Lang driver John Howie

# The driving force of convenience retail

DELIVERIES are crucial to the convenience industry, with disruption leading to the kinds of headaches retailers experienced during the blizzards of March.

Despite this, retailer interaction with the supply chain is for the most part limited to trips to the cash and carry and a quick chat with their delivery driver.

For CJ Lang driver John Howie, a product's journey to the shop shelf starts long before his arrival at the first Spar store of the day, sometimes eye-wateringly so.

Working a pattern of shifts that can start as early as 2:30am, John's routes take him right across Scotland, delivering a full

Birdsall is the man tasked with deciding which vehicle goes to what stores and when, and he has no shortage of variables to consider. It's a feat of organisational skill that must take into account road conditions, fuel consumption and customer orders.

Once Birdsall has orchestrated a plan for the scores of Spar deliveries to be made each week, pickers at CJ Lang get to work stocking up vehicles with all the goods they will need.

After Spar Edzell, John's route comprised five stores in Aberdeen, three managed Spar stores and two independent Spar forecourts, each taking a selection



Driver John Howie unloads a milk delivery at Spar Eurogarages in Aberdeen.

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complement of fresh, ambient and frozen products.

Last month Scottish Grocer hopped alongside John as he made the trip north to service Spar retailers in Aberdeen.

For Scottish Grocer, the day started at Spar Edzell, near Brechin, where at 7:45am John was already completing his first delivery.

For John, the day's journey started earlier still at CJ Lang's Dundee depot, where each shift the delivery driver first performs safety checks on everything from brakes to bodywork, before hitting the road in a Spar vehicle that's fully loaded for his route.

As he tells it, the logistics behind what gets loaded into John's vehicle are complex. CJ Lang route transport planner Mark

from ambient, chilled and frozen.

It's been a busy summer for John, with the warm weather giving many retailers a welcome lift. That's good news for stores, which John doesn't begrudge, but it does mean plenty of hours making deliveries in the hot sun.

"Last week was the busiest week the depot has ever had. We were really busy with the warmer weather. I visited a store in Drymen last Wednesday and they said they have had their best week ever," said John.

With the schools out traffic wasn't too much of a concern on the trip, but there's no question of Spar drivers making up a bit of time by flirting with the speed limit. Each CJ Lang vehicle is fitted with a telemetry monitoring system that lets staff at the depot

to monitor every pedal touch and turn of the wheel, allowing them to track deliveries and ensure everyone stays safe on the road.

This technology could soon benefit retailers, John said, as CJ Lang plans to introduce a store notification system based on its vehicle telemetry.

The first Aberdeen stop at a store in Mastrick provided John with an opportunity to show the difference between a professional driver and the general public.

Backing a fully loaded Spar truck into a tight loading bay is no mean feat, but John has been driving with CJ Lang for 17 years, and the vehicle plugged into its spot with ease.

But there's more to John's job than driving.

After checking in with the store manager, John assisted staff with unloading the delivery before, on this occasion, discussing the recall of delisted products and loading up empty cages.

The next four drops with John all went go plan, with frozen,

chilled milk and ambient for an Esso forecourt on North Anderson drive, a top-up for a recently refurbished managed Spar on Clifton Road, a full complement including tobacco for a Eurogarages forecourt, and a final stop at a managed store.

It's all in a days work for John, but that day doesn't end when the last store signs-off on the last invoice of the day, there are still tasks to complete at depot, as John explained.

"First of all I've got returns to put into the chill part of the depot, then I'll go round and empty out my cages and baskets.

"Then I'll go fuel and wash the vehicle and if there are any spillages in the back there is a guy fully dedicated to keeping the vehicles clean inside and out and you just tell him," he said.

Once John has finished all that, he reckons it'll be about half past three, when he'll head home for 12 hours before returning to do it all again, this time bound for Stranraer.