

The Renault ‘New’ Van Man Report

The evolution of Silver Van Man

A man from the electricity company came to change the meter in the Social Issues Research Centre office. As he went outside to collect the various parts he needed for the job I noticed a gleaming silver van bearing his company’s logo, parked tidily on the pavement. When he returned I said “Nice van!” He smiled with modest pride and replied “Yes, the company look after us well in that department – it’s more like driving a big car.” “What about the colour?” I said. “Well it’s class isn’t it, silver ...”

Introduction

Five years ago we published the results of the first definitive study¹ of White Van Man – a species of driver that had gained an unenviable reputation for being an ‘aggressive lunatic’ on the roads and a threat to all other road users. The popular press featured WVM as the modern-day football hooligan or lager lout – a breed of xenophobic and loutish moron who should never be trusted and, wherever possible, avoided. Such a danger had he seemingly become that even the government of the day threatened to curb his cavalier disregard for the highway code and his inherent anti-social tendencies.

Beneath the stereotype of WVM

Our research uncovered a different story. We found that while some van drivers did, indeed, fit the stereotype, lending that essential ‘grain of truth’ to an otherwise fictional account, the majority did not. For every ‘dodgy’ WVM there were many more ‘diamond blokes’, harshly and unfairly pre-judged simply because of their mode of transport. Among the tabloid-reading WVMs were also *Guardian* and *Times* types, whose food preferences while out and about rose considerably above the greasy spoon or lay-by hut and who were more likely to be seen on holiday in villas in Tuscany than on the beach at Marbella.

¹ See http://www.sirc.org/publik/white_van_man.html on the Social Issues Research Centre web site.

We concluded that because the drivers were so varied – in all important lifestyle and demographic characteristics – it was impossible to speak of WVM in the singular. It was a bit like trying to find a common feature among car drivers, other than the fact they drive cars.

Our report, despite its wide media attention that still trickles on to this day, did not remove the tarnished image of WVM altogether. Road users still find it convenient to blame him for all of the stresses they experience when driving. Just read the letter columns of regional newspapers. This one is typical:

“White Van Man is frequently attached to my rear bumper whether it be on the motorway or single carriageway roads. He drives closer than any car or HGV driver, overtakes on the inside and, when he cannot travel faster because of weight or hills, he still hogs a lane when the lane is empty to his left. He usually travels at over 90mph, has to slow on the hills, but there he is again on the flat, filling my mirror – and I don’t hang around”²

The root of this problem, of course, may simply be the fact that the vans are white - we have a bad experience with one white van driver and assume that any other white van is driven by a similarly deranged individual. In our report, therefore, we put forward a very simple proposal to remedy this – paint vans in different colours. This, we thought, might reduce the ‘White’ image and encourage other drivers to be a little more open-minded. Perhaps if van colours were more like those of cars, including perhaps some nice metallic finishes, we would be less prone to relegate their drivers to some sub-human species of thuggish road hog.

The evolution of the van

Van colours have certainly evolved in this direction over the past 5 years. White may still dominate, but increasingly we are seeing a new level of sophistication in what was once just a utilitarian type of metal box on wheels – something just to carry tools and bags of cement. And nowhere better is this upward trend revealed than in the now second most common colour of new vans – silver.

It is also the case that while vans have gone up-market, many cars have started to look a bit like vans – the increasingly ubiquitous SUVs, for example, with or without aggressive bull bars. As many car drivers now experience a similar driving position

² Western Daily Press, April 18 2003

and sense of enclosure to that of the van driver, the notion of there being two distinct species on the roads starts to be eroded. The busy mum, collecting her kids from school lest they fall victims to so-called 'stranger danger', now understands only too well the plight of the delivery driver with a tight schedule seeking a temporary parking space in his relatively chunky vehicle. At the other end of the spectrum the superstar David Beckham counts a pick-up truck – admittedly a macho black Ford Harley with a supercharged engine – among his favourite modes of transport.

The van driver, in contrast, with his comfy seats, carpets and stereo starts to feel that he is driving something that has much more in common with his own and other people's cars. No longer does he feel relegated to a lowly artisan's vibrating box, on which the odd dent or scratch is of little consequence. He starts to take a bit more care. He becomes more like a car driver.

WVM still lives on of course. But he is gradually being replaced by an altogether different breed, that of NVM – New Van Man. NVM was there all along, of course, as our earlier research showed. But now are we able to recognise him more clearly in a vehicle that better reflects his aspirations and even his essential civility.

The NVM study

To find out more about New Van Man we again took to the roads – this time in an appropriately silver van, although its colour was officially described as Cosmic Grey – reminding some of us of the hippy 60s when the word 'cosmic' had a particularly powerful significance. We conducted interviews with nearly two hundred van owners and drivers from Brighton to Glasgow. In addition we invited groups of van-driving tradesmen to participate in in-depth focus groups in the SIRC office to explore in more detail what they now expected from their essential mode of transport. First, though, we started with the commercial vehicle dealers. What did they make of NVM?

The dealers

Van dealers share with their cousins in the car trade finely honed psychological skills – the ability to read people. The art of selling is to understand what a customer *really* wants, and then gently persuade him (or her) that a particular vehicle meets the bill better than any other. Get this essential step wrong – fail to appreciate the often unconscious decisions that the customer has already taken – and no matter how slick

the sales patter, it will not have much impact. They also need to have a feel for how the driver wants to portray some kind of image of himself through the van that he drives.

Dealers these days clearly understand that van drivers now tend to look at a potential van in the way that would assess a car. Yes, it has to be fit for its purpose, and size is often important – will an 8' by 4' sheet of MDF fit in the back? It also has to be within a set budget. But it has to be much more than this. The increasingly varied types of people buying vans see it not only as a work horse but also something that they can happily park outside of their own house or that of their customer. Many will also want something that can be used for leisure and social activities as well. And so, colour and image become more important.

Many of the vans that the dealers sell are, of course, bought by large companies. Sadly, there is less concern shown by many of these large fleet owners for the psychological well-being of their drivers and white still dominates in this market. The owner-driver, however, has much more freedom to engage in a bit of personalisation. The dealers report that such people are increasingly choosing silver vans and see this as a way of demonstrating their distance from the WVM image and the stigma that often goes with it. It is more of a car colour, rather than a traditional van colour, and dealers understand this well. Over the past 5 years they have seen sales of silver vans rise by over 300%. But why silver, rather than other 'sophisticated' finishes? What does silver mean.

The psychology of silver

Silver is not really a colour at all – it is distinguished from light grey only by its shiny surface. To print silver on paper, for example, you need to use a special metallic ink, such as Pantone 877 – you cannot create it from the four basic printing colours.

Psychologically, however, silver has very positive associations. Its main property is one of coolness – both literally and metaphorically. But it also communicates prestige in a modest and understated way. It is not 'flashy' like, say, gold. Rather it is the colour of people who are secure in their own sense of themselves and don't have to brag about it.

Silver is also associated with trustworthiness and reliability. We use the term 'sterling' (literally something made of silver) to describe things that are 'first class' –

a 'sterling job' is a job well done and a 'sterling bloke' is someone on who we can rely. It is this quality of the colour silver that makes it a very appropriate choice for trades people, craftsmen and 'techies' – people from whom, their van colour suggests, we can expect sterling service.

Additional qualities communicated by silver add to its potential appeal. It is strongly associated with science and technology – a modern, hi-tech colour that we are familiar with on hi-fi systems and those gadgets that have become and an apparently essential part of our lives. The silver van, then, speaks of 'now' and of *Vorsprung durch technic*.

Finally, we should note that silver, along with muted and dark colours, denotes ambition. People who choose these colours tend to be those that are seeking to get ahead in life – people that we refer to in psychology has having high achievement motivation. Less ambitious people tend to prefer bright colours such as red or green or pastels. And white, unfortunately, tells us nothing at all.

The silver van driver (SVM), then, is telling us that not only is he a sterling kind of guy who is reliable, trustworthy and up-to-date with all the modern trends in his profession. He is also telling us that in a few year's time he wants to be more than a one van band.

Who is Silver Van Man?

Silver van drivers are the epitome of New Van Man – the 'vanguard' (excuse the pun) of an aspirational class of people – one that increasingly includes women. Of the van drivers that we interviewed 85% were male – in line with our previous WVM study. The drivers of silver vans, however, divided 60% male to 40% female. They also tended to be a little older. The largest age group of van drivers in general was 26-35 while for SVM (or SVL – Silver Van Lady) the biggest group was 36-45. They were also more likely to have chosen the van themselves, rather than having it supplied by their company.

The fact that women van drivers are more likely to choose a silver model does not, however, mean that their vans are somehow 'girlie'. Nobody in our focus groups or interviews thought so. Rather it reflects, perhaps, the fact that women are more aware of colour and its importance than men – which is why colour consultants who advise

women on clothes, make-up and accessories seem to do such good business these days.

The importance of colour

Of the van drivers in general who had chosen their own vehicle only a minority said that colour was an important factor in their decision. Among silver van drivers, however, colour was an important factor for three quarters of them.

When questioned a bit more about the colour of their vans our sample as a whole tended to mention things such as “works with the logo”, “it’s my favourite colour” and, for those whose vans were not white “I don’t want to be seen as a WVM!” The silver van drivers, however, gave two main types of response. Two thirds said “it stands out” and one third said “it’s trendy” – very clear and crisp indications of what silver communicates.

It is not just the owners or drivers of silver vans who perceive the colour in this positive way. In our focus groups the drivers of vans ranging in colour from white through green and orange to silver, said things like:

“Silver looks classier – you expect to polish it rather than ding it”

“It’s easier on the eye”

“Silver is top-notch – more professional and prestigious – more your West End florist than a chippy from Chippy”.

Looking the part

A number of our informants – especially those trades people whose work was most often in private houses – mentioned the need to present the right image. One said:

“There’s too many cowboys out there and you’ve got to show quality. It doesn’t mean that if you’ve got a good van then you will necessarily do a good job. But if you turn up on the job and you’ve got a decent van, and you talk to customers properly, they think you can. You can also put a bigger price on the job.”

Another commented:

“If I turn up with a rusty old van the people are going to think ‘Oh God, what have we got here?’

It was in this context that colour was thought to play a significant part. Orange, for example, once quite a popular colour on vans, was seen as now being both dated and aggressive – both qualities that a ‘professional’ should try to avoid projecting. Silver, however, was the colour of ‘executive’ cars – you find it on BMWs and Mercedes as well as the smarter family saloons and hatchbacks. And the car-like appearance of your van could make all the difference to the way in which potential clients viewed you and your ability to do a good job. It’s that vision of ‘sterling service’ again.

But size matters

We should not, however, think that van drivers have sacrificed practicality for psychological insights. They are more aware of the need to make an impression, especially in these more competitive times. But the van still has a job to do. It’s not much use looking professional if you can’t fit the tools and materials you need to do the job into your vehicle.

There was also a consensus view that the bigger vehicles commanded greater respect – both from customers and from other drivers. The higher driving position of the larger vans also gave an increased sense of dominance, as well as the more mundane advantage of being able to see over the traffic in front. Even here, however, most of our informants felt that the big vans were more car-like in both appearance, comfort and drivability. Power steering, for example, standard on most vans for several years, meant that you no longer needed biceps like a professional arm wrestler to park the thing.

There was also a bit of the legacy of the old WVM sentiment expressed in this context. Cars don’t argue with big vans – they get out of their way:

“You are more tempted to nudge out at junctions. You can push yourself out that bit more and people will just give way. Size gives you the confidence to do that. You can even challenge a bus in a big van.”

The smarter appearance of the van, however, and the need to keep it looking that way, can often temper these primeval WVM urges.

Vans and leisure

As vans have become like cars in terms of their refinements and ride quality, they increasingly serve as the sole means of transport for many people. They are used for

leisure and shopping when they are not serving as work-horses. And silver vans, in particular, fulfil these dual roles more than vans of other colours.

This merging of work and play in the van is relatively new. Five years ago very few people said that they used their van for anything other than work – apart, perhaps from helping a family member move some furniture or the odd ‘booze run’ to Calais to stock up for a wedding reception. Now, however, the new breed of van is seen as something that is respectable enough to be parked outside of a restaurant, cinema or even the golf course. One of our informants said that he chose his van because, although quite compact, he could stand his bag of golf clubs upright in the back.

Lifestyles

Van drivers generally are a pretty eclectic group. We noted 5 years ago that there was very substantial variation in lifestyles, and preferences in music, entertainment, holiday destinations, food, newspapers, etc. The same remains true to day and NVMs are a similarly varied bunch. There are rather fewer *Sun* readers but more *Times* readers (6 % as opposed to 3% 5 years ago), and they tend increasingly to opt for wine (13% as opposed to 7% 5 years ago) rather than beer (down from 30% to 23%). Some female NVLs read *Vogue* while 6% of NVMs read *FHM*. While sports and motor sports magazines still dominate the reading of 23% of NVMs this is significantly lower than the 35% 5 years ago. NVM is still most likely to local radio stations (33%) he is bit less likely to tune to Radio 1 (down from 33% to 27%) and a bit more likely to play classical music, even though this is the choice of only about 2%) on their smart in-van sound systems which have, of course RDS and Traffic Alert facilities and even a CD player. Otherwise, however, the differences, in these terms, between NVM and his WVM predecessor are small. They remain, despite images to the contrary, a quite classless and heterogeneous group. Silver Van Man, however, is distinguished mostly by his desire to stand out a little from the herd and by his greater appreciation of the significance of colour and what it expresses.

The relationship with the van

For many people, and delivery drivers or employees of large companies in particular, the van is just something they drive. They don’t have much attachment to it, especially if it is just a basic model that their bosses have felt is ‘good enough’ for them. Others, on the other hand, and owner-drivers in particular, often have very

strong attachments. In our interviews we heard comments such as “It’s my second home”, “We have fun together”, “It’s my office”, “She’s like a friend to me – she’s called Frankie.” Another interviewee referred to his van as ‘Lulu’ and two admitted to having regular conversations with their vans – which may seem like a cause for worry.

Having a relationship with an inanimate object may sound rather strange. We rarely, for example, give pet names to our fridge/freezers or washing machines and I know of nobody, fortunately, who has conversations with vacuum cleaners. But modes of transport are different. Like cars, vans provide us with a personal space – a mobile territory. And we defend that territory quite fiercely on occasions. Even calm, meek and mild mannered people will often show uncharacteristic rage if another vehicle invades what they see as being the invisible space around them – by ‘tailgating’, for example or, cutting sharply in front of them.

In addition to being ‘home turf’ the van increasingly, as we have seen, is becoming a means of self expression. Like cars, vans are something that we ‘wear’ as well as drive. And like our clothes, what we drive says something about the kind of people we are. So the personal attachments that we observe between owners and their van are perhaps not quite so odd as they may seem. They indicate quite clearly the extent to which vans have become much more than mere tools of the trade or metal boxes on wheels – now we expect much more from them.

Rising expectations

Increased sales of silver vans clearly reflect the higher expectations that drivers have of the vehicle in which they spend so much of their working life and, in many cases, their leisure time as well. Over 60% of the drivers in our survey said that they now expect more from their van than five years ago. It has to look right. It also increasingly has to have the mod cons and optional extras that one normally finds in cars. The old transistor radio, for example, that once might have been taped to the dashboard has now been replaced by a least a fitted stereo/cassette system. CD or mp3 players may soon be NVM’s standard source of entertainment. The van drivers that we interviewed rated such ‘luxuries’ as being nearly 8 out of 10 in terms of importance.

Also ranking highly in importance (over 7 on the scale of 0 to 10) were hands free mobile phones and ergonomic seats. Perhaps surprisingly, however, ‘safety features’ were top of the list for the large majority of drivers. NVM has come to expect his creature comforts. But in this era where taking risks is no longer seen as big and clever, he wants to make sure that he is also fully protected.

Air conditioning – a feature that just a few years ago was to be found only in luxury cars – is now becoming commonplace in quite modest family saloons and hatchbacks. As a result, NVM increasingly wants it in the cab of his van. Not many have it very often at the moment, but it rates over 8 out of 10 on their wish lists, just below satellite navigation systems. NVM has to find his way around a lot and anything that makes this easier is clearly more than just a gadget or toy – more an essential tool of the trade that saves time and money.

The same can be said of remote locking – after all, who really needs a little radio gadget when you can just turn a key. For busy craftsmen, however, that button on the key fob is important:

‘Once because I had hands full of tools I could only slide the door shut and when I came back the door had been opened and some kid was down the road with a jacket full of my gear. Now if I’d had with remote locking I could have locked up easy.’

Even the drinks holder has become a ‘must-have’ accessory for those van drivers whose schedules are now so tight that a relaxing cup of tea in a roadside caff has become a rare luxury.

Because he’s worth it

There is a strong sentiment expressed by NVM that he is entitled to a bit of luxury in his van, especially if he is a bit older than the average van driver. One said:

“Age is a factor here. At my age when you’re driving around from pillar to post you want a bit of comfort.”

Another echoed this sentiment:

“We’re using them [vans] day in and day out. I drive my van much more than I do my car – the van everyday and the car once a week if that . So why shouldn’t we have a few creature comforts.”

For some NVMs the optional extras in their vans were akin to small bonuses awarded to themselves in recognition of jobs well done and a healthy profit and loss account – a personal ‘thank you’. It makes them feel good about themselves and the job that they do. Perhaps the big companies with their fleets of often basic and impersonal vans might bear this in mind.

Changing attitudes and images

Even with the move towards colour the image of the white van – still the most common on the road – and its driver remains. It is recognised, but not necessarily accepted as fair, by the majority of van drivers. A half of all van drivers, however, think that a little progress at least has been made over the past five years. Some thought that there was now a bit more cooperation from commercial vehicle drivers – they had become better-mannered and less likely bellow expletives at dithering drivers from their high cab positions.

A substantial number of these more optimistic van drivers, and a third of all NVMs, thought that progress had been achieved because increasingly vans come in colours other than white. Because of this it was difficult to maintain the stereotype – especially when vans looked much smarter as well. An exception, however, was the red van of the Post Office driver. Because it they had the word ‘Royal’ emblazoned on the side, and were generally out of the reach of parking wardens, some felt that this induced a misplaced sense of superiority bordering on arrogance that often led to ‘unhelpful’ traffic manoeuvres.

The fleet drivers

The reason why many of the people in our sample were rather more pessimistic about the extent to which The WVM image had been eroded was the continuing preponderance of vans on the road that are driven by people who have little say in the type of vehicle they drive or the colour in which it comes. Because it is not *their* van they lack the motivation of the owner/driver to ensure that its appearance and the way it is driven present a positive image of themselves. Such vans are also less likely to

include the little luxuries and mod cons that make small builders, carpenters and florists feel good about themselves.

Last year a record number of 176,726 new Light Commercial Vehicles were registered in Britain – a 10% increase over the previous year. Year figures have risen by a further 13.5%. Of these LCVs, the vast majority were panel vans, light vans or what are termed ‘car-derived vans’. The remainder included a few pick-ups and the odd motor-home/caravan. This is generally accepted as a welcome indicator of an improving economy – the sales of vans being a barometer of how well business, both small and large, are doing.

The majority of these vans, however, were chosen and purchased by company owners and senior management rather than by the drivers themselves – around 70% of our sample had little or no choice in the van they drove or its colour. This also fits with reports from the dealers concerning the people to whom they sell. Those who did choose their own van, of course, were much less likely to opt for white. It would be fair to say, therefore, that it is the big companies who are keeping the image of WVM alive, not the small businesses of self-employed artisans who, unfairly, are more likely to be seen as the cowboys and dodgy geezers of the nation’s highways.