

Promising Signs

Dan Robinson, managing director of Traffic Management Products Ltd and chairman of the Association for Road Traffic Safety and Management (ARTSM), talks to Highways about how his organisation plays a vital role in the sector

How significant do you believe ARTSM is to the highways industry?

The association has never been stronger and has grown significantly in the last 10 years. We now total some 50 members, with a significant growth in members from the variable message signs (VMS) sector. We participate in the Department for Transport's (DfT) working group on signs and lines, have a presence on Highways England's Sector Scheme 9a working group, sit on several BSi committees and have been a significant force in the development and operation of TOPAS (Traffic Open Products and Standards), with its current and previous director chosen from the ARTSM executive committee.

How do you account for this growth in membership?

As signage technology has improved so have road users' demands to be kept informed. We can see the evidence on all road improvement sites, which now provide, as standard, additional information through signs to explain the reasons for road works, how long they will be in place, the expected time delay and other information.

This signage is often provided by smaller companies, which are faced with significant legislation to ensure that the signage they provide is appropriate. Our surveys of new members show the reason they choose to join ARTSM is to have guidance on compliance with regulations.

What do you think have been the major changes to signage in the past 10 years?

There have been so many. Most static signs are now manufactured from long lasting prismatic films with the signage digitally printed, bringing an end to lichen moss sitting on the top of vinyl letters. Aluminium substrates have been replaced by more carbon neutral composite materials. Self-righting bollards are now seen as standard, reducing electricity consumption, minimising maintenance and offering greater durability. VMS are at the heart of smart motorways, allowing the hard shoulder to be used as a running carriageway. Signals on both permanent and temporary sites operate on more sophisticated electronic management that minimises traffic delays and disruption. Of course a lot of signs now sit on passively safe posts, reducing the need for additional protection barriers.

What all recent sign developments have in common is that they are designed to minimise their environmental impact, lower whole-life cost and at the same time maximise efficiency. Lean working is a constant theme in our members' businesses.

We must not forget that the changes to sign requirement made in the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2016 and the subsequent revisions will also impact on how the road network will look in the near future. There is now greater flexibility in sign design, more local authority approval replacing DfT approvals and a continued drive to de-clutter the network, looking at how traffic signs and lines will work together to minimise clutter and of course cost.

What do you see as the future direction of ARTSM?

We have already come a long way from the association's humble beginnings in 1934. What is clear to us as an organisation is that:

- 1) Our industry has become increasingly reliant upon the experience of a small group of professionals who are approaching and in some cases past the retirement age
- 2) We can no longer rely on either central or local government to provide the resource facilities that were made available in previous years
- 3) When Brexit happens, we will have the opportunity and task of managing our own future legislation
- 4) Legislation will become more intense in future years, regardless of where the legislation is formed
- 5) The advent of driverless vehicles will impact significantly on traffic signage.

Our strategy in 2018 and going forward will be to address all of the above points. Our first duty will be to continue to provide a value added service to our members. A significant part of that will be to provide a more focused internal training facility for members to help them prepare for the changes that will undoubtedly occur.

It is clear that budget constraints on government departments are set to continue and the trend for industry to step up to fill the void has already been established. ARTSM will play its part in establishing the future direction for the sector by increasing its participation in a range of external organisations and cooperation with other trade associations.

We have already begun to introduce some of these changes and have recently created the new post of strategy and development officer to help the organisation realise its full potential.

The next 10 years will be an era of even greater change and we expect ARTSM to help drive that change for the benefit of all stakeholders.

Dan Robinson

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