



More of the same or all change?

ECG president **Wolfgang Göbel** considers the political developments ahead in 2017 and calls for better treatment and provision for drivers

“**W**elcome to a new and probably rather interesting year. We enter 2017 in Europe with a period of solid growth and recovery behind us. However, as our quarterly surveys of the membership of ECG tell us, we have perhaps a slightly more cautious approach to the months ahead. We know this year will likely be defined by politics as Donald Trump takes office as president of the US and (we assume) Brexit finally takes shape. The uncertainties of these events are already hanging over the market.

It will also be a year of elections in Europe, with at least Italy and France set to see a change in leadership, and Germany also going to the polls. Like it or not, political uncertainty destabilises economies to a degree and the car market tends to reflect this. The decision to buy a new car is all too easily postponed, as we saw following the 2008 financial crisis.

The European vehicle logistics market is also increasingly marked by consolidation. This is a constant process – every year we lose members as a result of mergers and acquisitions – however, as we have been forecasting for some time now, the trend appears to be accelerating.

However, the good news as far as ECG membership goes is that we are talking to many prospective new members and I have every confidence that 2017 will see our ranks reach record levels. This is vitally important in giving us confidence that we represent the sector as comprehensively as possible.

It is especially pleasing to see the membership in such good shape as we celebrate our 20th anniversary in February. We will mark this milestone in appropriate fashion with an event in Brussels: check the ECG website for details.

Meanwhile, the pace of change everywhere is becoming more rapid. We have been talking about ‘digitalisation’ for years, it seems, but now we see evidence of it changing our world everywhere we look. This is no less true for our admittedly rather traditional sector as things are beginning to change fast for vehicle distribution. We focused on this at our annual conference in Hamburg in October (see p16) and our many excellent speakers spoke not about what might happen, but rather what is happening and what they are going to do.

The ECG’s focus is on progressing the cross-industry working groups on digitalisation and capacity that were formed last year. It is vital we accelerate their work. Change brings opportunity and we believe it is essential to use the

current opportunities to standardise wherever possible and thus deliver efficiencies to all involved. These are exciting times and we should all work to make the most of them.

Drivers need better support

What is becoming increasingly evident is that technology is moving faster than we, or the market, can keep up with. Lagging even further behind these innovations are the legislators. In Europe we can see many examples of this, and the best – or perhaps I should say the worst – is the fact that we are still compelled to print paper delivery notes rather than use the available digital processes.

Another example where legislators seem out of touch is in the desire of the European Commission to develop tools to allow drivers to view parking availability and book it securely online. While this could bring efficiencies, it completely overlooks the real issue, which is the totally inadequate provision of parking and basic facilities for drivers to stop for a rest across Europe. An ECG board member recently spent a week ‘on the road’ with one of his drivers and was horrified to find that driver conditions, and the way in which they are treated, are far worse now than they were 40 years ago.

We can see fully autonomous cars and trucks in our future now, so maybe the need for compound staff will become a thing of the past. However, it is difficult to foresee cars loading themselves onto trucks, ships and railway wagons for a quite some time yet. European vehicle logistics carriers are nearly all struggling to recruit drivers. Perhaps we could help by encouraging people to treat them with more respect – it is a tough enough job, especially during the winter months.

I have also been dismayed to hear, once again, of cases of people shooting at vehicles while they are in transit on the back of car transporters. We have seen this before in Europe several years ago and it took a huge police operation to track down the gunman before someone was seriously hurt. During that time, hundreds of cars were damaged. Once again, this appears to be happening on the roads of Germany, and I hope that the latest perpetrator is caught more quickly this time. If you become aware of any shooting cases, please inform the ECG secretariat, which will compile the details to make them available to anyone who needs them.

On that note I wish you a happy, prosperous and, above all, safe New Year. ◊ ”