

## **AutoSock - the business case**

Potential fleet customers sometimes ask for a summary of what AutoSock are, what they do and why they make such a difference.

Many customers are sold on the concept but some come back to tell us they can buy similar products much more cheaply. It's true, there are many cheaper copies of AutoSock, some going to considerable lengths to get around AutoSock's patents, and some telling outright lies about their tests and approvals.

Even if you ignore questions about materials, labour, patents, product piracy, product liability insurance, approvals and all the rest of it, we argue that AutoSock are the best value, this being a function of both good performance in all types of snow, and wear rate. Fundamentally, AutoSock work better and should last longer!

The aim of this note is to tell you what AutoSock are, make an argument for including them in your winter resilience planning, and outline why they are not only better than the many copy products, but also better value.

### **What they are, how they work, why it makes sense to carry them**

AutoSock are reusable vehicle snow socks, sold in pairs, which combine friction science and high tech materials to give extraordinary levels of grip on snow and ice. They're available for almost all vehicle tyre sizes – for cars, vans, HGVs and forklifts – and are pulled over the driving wheels when the road conditions look particularly tricky, or after a vehicle has got stuck. They're easy to store in-vehicle – a packet of AutoSock is about the size of a folded shirt – and fitting them is obvious, requiring no special knowledge or training.

Vehicles which carry AutoSock should be able to keep moving safely in snowy weather, up and down hill, and rescue themselves if they get stuck.

Many businesses are using AutoSock because they want to be confident that they've done what they reasonably can to get ready for snowfall – the reality is that it does snow from time to time, usually at short notice – so they will be able to get to their customers' premises, do work, solve problems, issue invoices!

AutoSock should therefore be of *strategic interest* to any business that needs to travel to its customers, whatever the weather. We already supply many emergency service fleets, including fire, police and ambulance services.

Businesses also need to get their key staff to work, and safely back home again.

Their effectiveness should not be doubted. As well as being sold as Original Equipment to numerous car manufacturers, AutoSock provide so much grip that they are approved to the new European standard for 'supplementary grip devices' (EN16662, effective from 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020), which includes snow chains, and covers vehicles to 3.5 tonnes GVW, including light commercial vehicles (Category N1).

AutoSock AS is owned by the Fred. Olsen Group, whose main interests are in shipping and energy.

### **Buy winter tyres? / Buy AutoSock? / Just hope for the best?**

We sometimes say that “AutoSock are a form of insurance”, but really they’re better because unused AutoSock don’t have a limited shelf life. If AutoSock aren’t used this winter they may well be required next winter. They’re only any use, of course, if they are in the vehicles *before* the snow falls! They’ll prove their worth the first time they’re used, for sure.

It’s sensible to have a hedging strategy in times of uncertainty. This is as true of winter resilience planning as it is of currency purchasing. If you don’t use winter tyres, then AutoSock are a sensible and much cheaper option.

In brief:

- Snowfall in the UK and Ireland is unpredictable and often happens at short notice.
- Some preparation is recommended so that business disruption is kept to an acceptable level when from time to time we do have snow.
- If the UK had serious snowfall every winter then winter tyres would be mandatory.
- But we don’t get snow every winter, and the use of winter tyres is therefore minimal.
- Winter tyres have upfront and storage costs. And when fitted they will always be wearing out, whether or not it snows. They also have limitations – AutoSock are often used on winter tyres.
- We’re not suggesting that AutoSock are a substitute for winter tyres; winter tyres are excellent, but not always easy to justify.
- Many fleets now use all-season tyres. These are neither one thing nor the other, but they’re evidence that winter resilience is being taken seriously, and of course they make a difference to winter driving. It still makes sense for vehicles on all-season tyres to carry AutoSock, to bring their traction to winter tyre standards at minimum.
- Another decision is to do nothing, to hope for the best.
- The ‘hedge’ is to carry AutoSock - you only use them when you need them.

### **Copy products**

AutoSock, based in Oslo, invented and developed the whole vehicle snow sock concept, working closely with the German TÜV. They use science-based, high tech materials. The road contact fabric was specially developed to maximise dry friction, and be hard wearing. The front mesh facing provides stability, prevents the sock from being pulled off and falling behind the wheel, and also makes for much easier fitting. It’s important to have an open mesh as otherwise powder snow can bulk up inside the sock. The mesh facing is therefore a very important part of the design, but unfortunately it’s not a cheap component.

AutoSock hold the crucial patents, and have successfully prosecuted many European copiers, but nevertheless there are many copies on the market.

Some copies look as if they are made from black lawn-mower grass-catching material; they are! This is a knitted material (not woven) and as such it will unravel quickly when it starts

to wear out, quite apart from its rot-resisting coating which reduces its dry friction capabilities. These socks work fine when the snow is sticky, but they are not good in wetter or dry / powdery snow. We've seen comparative product tests where the same material is used in two snow sock copies; one product was given a high mark, but the other has a safety warning against it - presumably because these near identical products were tested at different times of day, one before the sun had started to warm the snow, and one when the snow was much wetter.

Other copies include elastic on the road contact surface, intended to hold the fabric against the face of the tyre and therefore get around AutoSock's patent. This highlights a fundamental misunderstanding – the sock needs to be free to move around the rotating wheel to minimise the fabric wear rate. An AutoSock will typically rotate once around the tyre for every eight rotations of the wheel.

Some brands claim to have a TÜV approval – which some do, but not for their snow socks!

Most of the copies are sold on price, and many are much cheaper than AutoSock could possibly make them for, bearing in mind that AutoSock use bespoke materials and their labour force is paid a living wage in the countries of manufacture.

AutoSock and most of their competitors are therefore 'chalk and cheese'. AutoSock allow our fleet buyers to tick all the boxes for both social responsibility and environmental responsibility (certificates can be provided on request), as well as product liability, and they're also best value overall because of their better performance and wear rate.

### **For more information**

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