

# ON THE PLUS SIDE

*It's rare that a top-end coach company enters the market with a full fleet of new vehicles. But that's what industry stalwarts Kevin Hughes and Mark Drury have managed, with impressive results achieved already.*

*Jessamy Hudson visits to find out more*

**H**ow did you start your operation? Was it passed down the family? Have you grown steadily from one vehicle? Did you join a coach company and work your way up to ownership?

However it was, chances are you weren't able to set up a coach operation with 11 new vehicles bought outright, with no part exchange. It's also unlikely that you had a large pot of experience to draw from. But that was the unique position given to Kevin Hughes and Mark Drury when they set up Passenger Plus last year.

The operation began on 1 December 2012, initially running a staff contract for a blue-chip company based in Surrey, close to Passenger Plus' own base.

When Kevin Hughes' Kent-based AMB Travel won the contract, he turned to long-standing acquaintance Mark, who had over a decade's experience managing high-profile operations, to head up the new venture.

And as good an operation as AMB Travel is, Kevin didn't think its branding was quite right for blue-chip clients, which is how Passenger Plus was born – a high-spec, top-end coach company, with brand new, environmentally-friendly vehicles, a new name, a new livery and a new market.

## ■ GREEN: THE NEW BLACK

"We didn't want to run it with non-corporate branding," explains Kevin. "AMB is a traditional, well-recognised coach company, but market research and experience told us that corporate clients require more subtle branding. Passenger Plus is a separate product and heavily promotes green travel."

And it's greener travel that's becoming a major consideration for these corporate clients, says Mark.

For example, some of Passenger Plus' clients have environmental caveats attached

to their planning permission, or simply want to promote green travel. "We can add value there where most operators can't," says Mark, "by meeting these caveats and offering clients a full green travel solution, from planning and promotion through to reporting and producing company travel plans."

But with vehicles operating mainly in the mornings and evenings, all luxuriously fitted with leather seats, vehicle tracking, reversing cameras, even illuminated step risers (which Mark is particularly enamoured with), its potential goes much further than just contracted services.

Many of its clients are large American companies, and Passenger Plus' two bases in Surrey and Kent (the latter at AMB Travel), exactly an hour apart, are convenient for Gatwick and Heathrow.

It also does private hire, and uses discreet advertising – on the back of the on-board safety cards, for example – to target the members of staff it transports every day.

Looks, of course, are very important. Passenger Plus has clean, fresh branding, a matching website, and quick-response (QR) codes on the vehicle doors.

"One operator asked me if we were a broker, because our website looks so slick," says Mark. "But that's probably why brokers get customers – they do have nice websites."

"It's a great way to attract customers and once you've got them, you've got them. We do the job right and make it easy for them to come back to us."

## ■ TURNING A NEW LEAF

Every company manager dreams about what they'd do differently if they could start again, says Mark, and Passenger Plus has allowed him and Kevin to effectively start afresh, drawing on the experiences of other friendly operators too. These include Lucketts, Johnsons and Westbus among others. "That's



'Bit of a bromance': Kevin (l) and Mark



Most vehicles have been bought outright

the lovely thing about this industry," says Mark. "If ever I've got a question I can just put it out on Twitter, and I'll get several answers."

Also, it's thanks to their long histories and reputations that they were able to negotiate such good deals when buying all their brand-new vehicles, as well as decent insurance premiums – not an easy thing for most new-start businesses.

"We've been in the industry our whole lives," Mark says. "Every decision we've made has been properly thought about."

Mark joined Buzzlines in 2000. Before that he worked for DAF dealer Channel Commercials, after the sale of his family's coach repair and paint business, where he worked from school.

Kevin, on the other hand, well remembers washing down his father's minibuses at the age of nine. That business became Ashford Minibuses – now trading as AMB



Illuminated step risers in Sprints

Travel thanks to a Setra bought in 2008, swiftly followed by three more. AMB is still expanding in Ashford, with a new depot and maintenance facility currently in the planning stages.

Mark describes their relationship as 'a bit of a bromance'. "It's been hard work setting this up – lots of long days and late nights," he says. "But it's great that there's two of us. We've always got someone to bounce ideas off, and as we've got different backgrounds we can offer each other fresh perspectives. We also share the same attention to detail and passion for doing things right, as well as a similar sense of humour."

## ■ GETTING PERSONAL

There are currently 15 staff, some of whom were TUPE'd over with the initial contract, backed up by 25 more at AMB Travel. Maintenance work, accounts and training

"Tracking is great," says Mark. "We use it to try and explain to drivers how much fuel costs. Some operators don't even realise that if a driver leaves the engine idling for 90 minutes because he's watching a DVD in the coach, it'll cost the operator £10."

Passenger Plus' website is fully mobile-friendly, and it's using Facebook and Twitter to get its brand out – and also its personality. "It's the lighter side, which you can't really show with a website or brochure," says Mark. "We think if people like us, they'll book with us."

Marketing is carefully targeted; Mark and Kevin realise they can't rely on a directory any more. For example, they've designed a flyer aimed specifically at golf clubs, and have started to promote posts and use sponsored advertising on Facebook.

Image is incredibly important. Drivers are always smartly uniformed, and while clients are presently greeted at the airports with paper name signs, Mark and Kevin intend to use tablets for this. "You have to treat everyone at the same level, and be the best you can be every time," says Mark.

## ■ THE GAP WIDENS

"I have a clear vision of how everything should look."

"From the start I thought to myself, 'If I was a passenger, what would I want to see?' It's only when the smart uniform isn't there that they'll miss it. They're too busy to notice otherwise."

But asked whether this is the way the whole coach industry is going, Kevin shakes his head. "The industry will always have people for whom it's all about price," he says.

"Some schools will hire Joe Bloggs' company because he can do it £10 cheaper. They don't ask any questions about what safety and equipment you've got in place, or any qualifications your drivers have. One driver came to AMB Travel asking for work – he'd been doing school runs for another company, and he didn't even have a CRB check."

According to Kevin, the gap between professional coach companies and non-professionals is getting bigger, thanks in part to older drivers drifting out because they don't want to do CPC training, the rates that some companies are willing to work for, and also corporate and government clients demanding ever-increasing reams of paperwork.

It's no bad thing for Passenger Plus. CoachMarque and BUSK Benchmark approval are both in the pipeline. "Corporate clients like to know you're independently assessed," says Mark. "CoachMarque does that. Long-term, we hope it'll get us more work."

Adds Kevin: "We're hoping that these will, in time, help us win new corporate business and schools work, for AMB as well."

As for the distinctive name, Mark explains they simply wanted something a bit different. "We're doing more, going over and above," he says. "We provide green travel, and a 'travel manager' to make sure the client gets exactly what they want."

"Running coaches is just one part of our product." ■