



Company president,
David Benedict

David Thomas Tours

A Study In Steady GROWTH



By Rick Mullen
Busline Magazine
Associate Editor

Like the wise marathon runner who develops a plan and establishes a pace that will ensure he or she will be the first to the finish line, **David Thomas Tours, Inc., of Philadelphia, PA,** continues to be a winner with its conservative growth strategy and uncompromising

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— David Benedict

commitment to excellence and diversification.

“Methodical growth by way of referrals, marketing and maintaining happy customers — that is the plan,” said president **David Benedict.**

And it is a plan that is working, as the outlook for the future of David Thomas Tours, a full-service luxury motorcoach transportation company, is strong, even as some other transporta-

tion companies in the Philadelphia area have fallen by the wayside, Benedict said.

“Profitability is more important than expansion. We have slowly grown and expanded over the years,” Benedict said. “Our goal is steady growth. That way we can handle the business as it grows.”

David Thomas Tours features top-of-the-line coaches. It has a fleet of 18 MCI coaches, including seven E4500s,

MCI’s luxury flagship model, and six D4005s, MCI’s American Classic series. The company also started a school bus division five

years ago, specializing in serving private schools. In 2005, the school bus division was made into a separate corporation that now operates 15 buses.

Also, under the same umbrella, is **David Tours and Travel,** a travel agency started by Benedict in 1980 to serve the Atlantic City casino market, which was relatively new at that time.

“After a year or so, we began diversifying by doing other tours, including

group tours,” Benedict said. “We continued growing the tours, and after four or five years, we entered the leisure travel business.”

Throughout the 1980s, the company continued to grow, and developed many unique tours it sold to other tour operators, travel agents and bus companies. The company introduced several seafood tour packages in Baltimore, MD, which became extremely popular.

“We built on that with the crab, shrimp and lobster feasts. We then broadened our horizons and brought in gospel events, in conjunction with the seafood feasts. We also brought in live entertainment,” Benedict said. “We still do the feasts and summer packages. We have diversified more and more over the years, and the company has changed completely from the initial few years.”

In 1997, David Thomas Tours was formed to serve David Tours and Travel.

“We started our motorcoach company out of a need to service our tour company with quality equipment. Until 1997, we went to other bus companies for our tours,” Benedict said.

“From that point on, we continued to grow the motorcoach company. David Thomas Tours is the name of the motorcoach company, and David Tours and Travel is the name of the travel agency.”

Some of the buses display David Thomas Tours logos, and others display David Tours and Travel logos.

“I know it can be confusing, but they are two separate corporations under one roof, with the same ownership. There is a lot of synergy between the two companies,” Benedict said.

In describing the motorcoach operation, Benedict refers to it as a “higher-end” company, meaning the customer is going to pay more, but, in return, the customer is going to also receive more by way of the quality of the vehicles, service, and other amenities associated with booking a tour.

“The bus company began initially as a way to serve the travel company, but along the way it established its own identity,” Benedict said.

And that identity is one of a first-class, high-quality operation in a market that tends to be more price driven



Company administrators are, left to right, Dennis Potter (Systems Administrator), Barbara Dennig (Administrative Assistant), Susan Miller (Administrative Support Manager), Peggy Caudle (Administrative Support), and Charlene Swift (Administrative Support).

than quality driven.

“We were very surprised the demand kept growing for our type of quality service. In our market, most of the operators focused on price, and quality was second. It tends to be the same way today, but we have not changed

our course, which is first-class quality,” Benedict said.

The company turns over its top-of-the-line equipment every four to five years, and recently purchased eight new coaches within the past year.

“Consistency, quality, customer service and professionalism — when a group or customer books a trip with us, they know they are always going to receive a late-model coach that is clean, and a professional driver who is clean, who is in uniform, and who knows where he is going. They will not get that three out of four times, they will get that 100 percent of the time,” Benedict said. “Our sales agents provide detailed itineraries and mapping for our drivers, over and beyond the norm for the industry.”

A Modern Fleet Of Luxury Motorcoaches

David Thomas Tours’ fleet of motorcoaches has the reputation of being one of the newest, one of the most attractive, and one of the best-maintained in the Mid-Atlantic region.

One of the reasons the company is able to maintain such a high standard of cleanliness and maintenance is its

Turbo Images Wants To Honor Its Long-standing Customer, David Benedict Of David Thomas Tours



Turbo Images, a leading contender in the graphic identification industry, is delighted to take the opportunity to express its sincere appreciation to Mr. David Benedict of David Thomas Tours, a "Transportation Solution Provider" from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for his 7 straight years of continuous support and loyalty.

Pier Veilleux, President of Turbo Images says, “We are extremely proud to serve prestigious customers such as David Thomas Tours. David is a pioneer in the use of our exclusive Neon Graphik Concept® which you can find on every unit in his fleet. Through the years, David has graciously spoken to others about the benefit of using our Neon Graphik Concept® and has always spoken highly of Turbo Images; for this, I personally send him my most sincere gratitude and want David to know, it is a pleasure and an honour serving him!”

Since 1994, Turbo images has helped Transportation Companies around North America, brand their vehicles in creative and dynamic ways. Turbo Images’ graphics have been produced and installed on more than 14 000 vehicles in 2006 alone. Among other prestigious customers of Turbo Images, we count Greyhound Lines Inc., AC Transit, Golden Gate Bridge Highway & Transportation District, Pacific Western Transportation, New Jersey Transit, Arrow Stage Lines, Latin Express Services, Canada Post, Tim Hortons, Pepsi Bottling Group, Laidlaw Carriers and countless other valuable clients which deserve our sincere gratitude.

Coach During The Day



Coach At Night





Pictured from left are, Juliusz Warszawa (Dispatcher) and Freddie Smith (Director of Safety).

large, 45,000 square-foot, full-service facility situated on 6.5 acres. In that facility, the company is able to perform all its own maintenance. The building also contains a fueling facility, and a wash bay with radiant heat.

“We have a heated wash bay and dumping facility.

That is very important. Our buses are washed inside and out. Our dump is scrubbed every day. Our customers expect a clean bus,” Benedict said. “Even on the coldest winter day, our buses will never go out dirty. They are cleaned every day.”

The buses are also continually checked for scratches and dents.

“A bus is a big unit, and a big unit can get dented or scratched out on the street very easily,” Benedict said. “Anytime we have a dent or scratch, we fix it. We don’t drive around looking like that.”

The company also goes first class in other aspects of its fleet’s appearance, including using Avery 3-D decals supplied to it by a Canadian company, **Turbo Images**. The special decals are “neon graphic” decals which, when light shines on them, can be seen glowing up to 2,000 feet away.

“Our buses are moving billboards. We have many eye-catching, attractive moving billboards on the road that are great marketing tools,” Benedict said.

The company continually acquires business from customers who have been impressed by the appearance of the coaches after having seen them on

the road.

“Presentation is very important. That is why we make a big investment in the appearance of the buses, including the decals,” Benedict said.

It is not only the outer appearance of the motorcoaches that keeps customers buzzing, it is also what is offered on the inside that keeps them coming back.

“We have the latest coaches. We equip our coaches with many state-of-the-art amenities for our customers,” Benedict said. “All of our coaches have DVD and CD players. They have cup holders and snack trays. The coaches will have a card table or two. Three of our new coaches have wheelchair lifts.”

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The coaches are also decked out with climate control, AM/FM stereo systems, public address systems, window shades, individual reading lights, head and foot rests, reclining seats, emergency cell phones and kneelers for safe and easy boarding.

The larger, 56-seat Renaissance model coaches also have VCR and cassette players, and are equipped with a lavatory.

The company’s newest buses also boast the latest in technological advances, particularly in the area of sensors, which provide added safety for passengers.

When the vehicle is traveling backward, bumper sensors tell the driver if there is an object behind the bus, and how far away it is. Other sensors monitor heat and air-pressure in tires, to alert the driver in the case of overheated brakes and if a tire is going flat.

“These latest technologies are helping buses to be even more safe,” Benedict said.

As a testimony to the company’s outstanding reputation, and overall high operating standards, the Philadelphia Truck and Buses Enforcement Division has chosen the David Thomas Tours



Maintenance staff pictured from left are, Ed Murphy (Director of Maintenance) and William Toro (Night Maintenance Manager).

facility as the site of a seminar to train local truck and bus inspectors.

“They chose our facility because they feel our company is a quality company that is concerned about safety and well-

maintained equipment,” Benedict said. “We welcome the involvement

with our city’s truck and bus enforcement effort.”

Top-Notch Drivers Are Top-Notch Ambassadors

It is not enough to be an experienced and excellent driver to operate a bus for David Thomas Tours. To be sure, driver excellence and experience are crucial requirements to be considered for a job at the company, but of equal importance is the ability of a potential candidate to exhibit what it takes to be an “ambassador.”

In addition to being experienced and safety-conscious drivers, David Thomas Tours’ drivers must also be articulate, knowledgeable, able to interact in a positive and helpful way with customers, and maintain a high level of appearance, among other requirements. All of these attributes must be on display at all times by an “ambassador” for the company.

“We are one of the highest priced services, and we feel we deliver the best product. Our drivers should reflect that. Our employees should fit the bill,” Benedict said.

“We always tell our customers, ‘Whoever we send, you are going to

like.' We need drivers to fit that mold."

When a passenger boards a David Thomas Tours bus, he or she can be assured the man or woman behind the wheel has an excellent driving record, is an experienced motorcoach driver, and has undergone a series of some of the most stringent interviews, screenings, tests, checks and training sessions in the industry.

"In order for a candidate to even get an interview, he or she has to be neat, hold a commercial driver's license, have a clean driving record — no accidents, no violations — and has to have some good experience," Benedict said. "They must have the type of friendly personality that people will like. They need to meet those requirements before we begin the interviewing process."

In addition to a thorough interviewing process, drivers will have passed a physical, and drug and alcohol screenings. All the required U.S. Department of Transportation forms will have been successfully filed, and road tests will have been successfully completed.

"Drivers must pass a road test. One of our trainers must certify a driver on a particular coach. We have different sized coaches, and a driver must be certified on each one he operates," Benedict said.

Safety is at the top of the list of priorities drivers must master. Drivers are well-versed in the company's safety philosophy and safety requirements.

David Thomas Tours drivers are experts at helping people on and off the bus safely, and at observing speed limit and other road signs.

Drivers maintain a high state of awareness for low bridges and overpasses, weight restrictions, hanging signs and other potential hazards.

Safety awareness begins before a bus ever rolls, as the driver will visually inspect the bus, and perform other



Sales staff pictured from left are, back row: Ingrid Benedict (Charter Sales Manager), Mary Jo St. John (Tour Sales Manager) and Jamie Goodfellow (Assistant Charter Sales Manager); front row: Debbie Carlin-Kennedy (Sales), Beth MacGregor (Sales) and Jennifer Krivinskas (Sales).

checks, such as making sure his seat and mirror are adjusted properly.

"Safety is No. 1, and customer service is No. 2," Benedict said.

Such a high emphasis is put on safety at David Thomas Tours, that the company requires all of its full-time drivers to receive what is called an "S" endorsement.

In Pennsylvania, the "S" endorsement is a school bus license which requires 14 hours of classroom training

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and six hours of on-the-road training. It also requires drivers to pass a road test and a written exam. A CDL license is required to take the "S" endorsement course.

Although some company drivers may never drive a school bus, Benedict, who was the first at the company to complete the course, is sold on the added safety education the "S" program provides.

"I went first, and I felt other drivers were going to benefit from taking the course," Benedict said.

In addition to its school bus operation, the company conducts many school-related educational tours involving students of all ages, especially in the spring. The "S" course has proven to be a valuable tool to prepare drivers for situations that may arise with school-age youngsters.

"Part of the training deals with the unpredictability of school-age children," Benedict said. "If you have the training, and are aware of situations that might occur, you are more likely to be able to prevent some of those things."

Benedict tells the story of when the company's "S" course program was launched, many veteran drivers, some with more than 30 years of experience, thought the training would be a waste of time.

"Several of the senior guys, who had been driving for a long time, came to me and said, 'We learned something in the class,'" Benedict said. "So, it proved to be beneficial for all the drivers, including the veterans."

"We have an excellent safety record, and it is not by accident — we work very hard to keep it that way.

"Much of our training is repetition, but it does not let people forget. You can never get too relaxed when you are driving a motorcoach, or any large commercial vehicle. You always

have to be on your toes.

"We feel our training program helps keep our drivers focused. Drivers cannot afford to allow themselves to become overconfident."

First Class Customer Service Is First Class Marketing Strategy

All companies strive to expand their customer base, and David Thomas Tours is no exception. But in keeping with its measured, conservative growth strategy, the company

focuses first on its established customer base from which growth will be a manageable by-product.

“Our philosophy is, we are going to keep our customers we have, first and foremost, and then seek new ones,” Benedict said. “It is very important to keep your current customers.”

Therefore, customer service becomes paramount as a marketing tool to maintain and grow the company.

“We want to be the best at what we do. In order to be the best, we have to be on top of our game with customer service,” Benedict said.

Many times the scenario involves consumers who are not especially knowledgeable about the differences in what bus companies have to offer. Those consumers tend to book based primarily on price. Since David Thomas Tours does not attempt to compete on that level, it must take the price component out of the equation by giving the customer options which make paying a higher price a wise choice.

“What we try to do is educate the customer about the market, and do so in a very friendly, customer service-oriented way,” Benedict said. “We help customers in their selection process.”

On many occasions, after initially balking at the higher prices, customers will return to David Thomas Tours after shopping around, simply because of the friendliness extended to them by the company during that first contact.

“A week later, they will call back and say, ‘You were the nicest company that we called, and even though your price is a little higher, we want to book through you,’” Benedict said.

The company also educates customers on the many other advantages of spending a little more, including the company’s high maintenance standards, state-of-the-art coaches with many amenities, and the skill and professionalism of the drivers, among others.

“You cannot give the best product at the lowest price. It just doesn’t work that way. You get what you pay for,” Benedict said. “When a group is booking a big trip, they are already spending a lot of money. It is worth it to spend a

little more to have peace of mind.

“We always recommend to customers to come and tour our facility and see how well we take care of our equipment. We encourage customers to come and see our buses before they spend their money. That is part of our educational process. That is how we facilitate customer-based growth.”

In addition to its attention-getting vehicles acting as moving billboards, the company also employs other modes of marketing and advertising, including radio, television and the Internet.

One of the keys to the company’s success in the area of marketing and advertising has been its expertise at tracking results and its willingness to make changes.

“In whatever venue we advertise, we know what works and what doesn’t work. Over the years, we will adjust our marketing budget accordingly. What worked last year, might not work this year,” Benedict said. “We look at trends as they apply to the Internet, radio, TV and other areas, and we shift our funds to what is working.

“You can’t just sit back and wait for people to call. They will call, but you have to reach out to keep the phones ringing. You have to let people know about your product.”

Diversification Is A Hedge Against Changes In The Marketplace

“Don’t put all your eggs in one basket” — it is an old cliché, but one Benedict firmly believes is a successful business strategy that fosters stabiliza-



Customers are welcomed to tour the David Thomas Tours facility.

tion in a sometimes unpredictable marketplace.

“We have several niches. I strongly believe in diversification,” Benedict said.

Diversification, a conservative growth strategy based on a foundation of repeat customers, customer service as a marketing tool — all of these concepts are interwoven into the fabric of David Thomas Tours to keep it strong, and on a steady growth path.

“We have good diversity that has afforded us success over the years,” Benedict said.

Diversification is evident in all three phases of the business — the tour,

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motorcoach, and school bus companies.

“We have seafood feasts in Baltimore. That is a big market, maybe 500 buses a summer will be going to those. We also do those in Rhode Island,” Benedict said.

The seafood market is basically a weekend venture, so the company diversifies by making several types of tours available at different times during the week. One new venture is

tours to attend a casino show.

"We will promote a show and get as many as 2,000 people to go. We pick a day that is light, like a Monday, for example, to stimulate growth on what would otherwise be a slower day," Benedict said. "We look at our utilization. You can't make a successful business by just doing business on Saturday."

"Diversified product, consistent quality and hands-on involvement in the operation, that is what has worked here."

Other tours offered include narrated tours to New York City around lower Manhattan, tours to the American Museum of Natural History and to Broadway to see a show.

There are also tours to New Jersey, Amish country in Lancaster County, PA, Gettysburg, PA, the Philadelphia countryside, Christmas holiday tours, dinner theater tours and many more.

Schools and colleges are also major customers of David Thomas Tours. The company is involved in many school field trips and serves many colleges and universities.

"Thousands and thousands of kids are involved in our school trips," Benedict said.

Educational tours are offered to historical sites including Gettysburg and Valley Forge. There are science-oriented tours such as the one to the Baltimore Aquarium.

The philosophy of taking care of its current customers to promote growth has worked well, and has promoted diversification as more business is added to the "foundational base" via testimonies of satisfied customers.

"The repeat customers, the people who use our equipment throughout the year, are our foundation," Benedict said.

One market of steady growth has been institutional customers, such as companies, schools, colleges and universities.

"We know what we have to do to keep those customers, and we do keep them," Benedict said. "Whether the

economy is good one year, or slow one year, that institutional customer is always there at the base."

For example, Benedict said the college business has more than doubled in the past year.

"Colleges talk about who they use and what they like. That is how we get referrals. Colleges that we would have never imagined have become our customers this past year," he said.

Benedict reiterated the company's plan of maintaining a slow, steady pace for growth.

For example, the company recently expanded its facility with three additional acres, but that expansion had been in the works for several years.

"We are a very conservative operation," Benedict said. "We would rather have several smaller schools, all diversified — that is our key to success, diversification in all aspects of our business — tours, charter, school buses. If we lose one client, it does not hurt us to the extent it would if we had not branched out."

Fluctuation Of Fuel Prices Poses Modern-Day Challenge

Fuel prices have always fluctuated somewhat, but the extent and the timing of today's fluctuations, and overall high prices pose a major obstacle for transportation companies trying to make a profit.

"Fuel costs can go up or down 10 to 15 cents a day, which affects your bottom line," Benedict said.

"Years ago, fuel didn't move more than a half a cent per day. Fuel costs have been a major obstacle to making a profit. You try to recoup some of that the best you can, but it is difficult because it happens so quickly."

Another challenge facing transportation companies is keeping up with governmental regulations.

"When a company is doing everything it is supposed to be doing, such as David Thomas Tours, it takes a lot of administrative time," Benedict said. "It takes a lot of time and paper work to make sure

everything is legal and ready for inspection at any time. That is always a challenge."

Many companies find it difficult to employ enough drivers to meet their needs, however David Thomas Tours, even with its very selective hiring process, manages very well in that area, Benedict said.

The company also focuses its efforts on making the transition from the slower winter business cycle to the busier warm weather business cycle.

"In our neck of the woods, business is seasonal. So, it is always a challenge to ramp up for the busy time, when you have been going through the slow time," Benedict said.

Owner Involvement, Committed Employees Vital To Success

For a company the size of David Thomas Tours and its sister companies, which employ about 70 people, Benedict said owner involvement and loyal, committed employees are important keys to success.

"I have a good staff. I have a good sales operation, and a good maintenance operation," Benedict said. "Employee loyalty and retention are so very important. If you walked into my office 10 years ago, and you walked into my office now, you would see the same people."

Benedict said his primary responsibilities are deciding what direction the company should take, and being heavily involved in the marketing aspects of the business.

"Diversified product, consistent quality and hands-on involvement in the operation, that is what has worked here," he said.

"I'm very fortunate to have very good people who work here as if it were their own company. They deal with issues as if it were their own company. For those things, I cannot be thankful enough."

*Contact: David Thomas Tours, Inc.,
14005 McNulty Road,
Philadelphia, PA, 19154.
Phone: 215-969-6700;
Fax: 215-969-4014.*

Web site:

www.davidthomastours.com.