



LIMOUSINE, CHARTER & TOUR

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LCT On the Record: Bob Levine

August 5, 2009

LCT: Tell us about Hy's

Bob Levine: My father, Hy, started the business in 1951. Like many others, he started with one car and built it up. I joined the business in 1973, and at that time, we had 20 vehicles. Today, we are more than 100. We are primarily a corporate and funeral business with a little bit of retail mixed in, but our retail business is growing.

LCT: Tell us about working in the funeral industry.

Bob Levine: We have a fleet of 18 hearses and 28 six-door vehicles that we use exclusively for funerals. Funerals account for 20% of our business. We work for a number of different funeral homes that each has their own unique requirements. Our vehicles are dark blue, silver, and black depending on which funeral home we are working with. Most limousine operators do not typically do funerals. We got into it at the right time. One of our selling points is that we turn our vehicles every three years so they are all very new. Funeral vehicles do not get a lot of miles on them. It is often more cost effective for a funeral home to use us rather than have their own vehicles. This trend is changing though as funeral homes are also starting to see the recessionary crunch; they are looking at revenue streams and returning to owning their vehicles. Our chauffeur staff for this market consists primarily of retired individuals who are looking to offset a fixed income and can only work a limited amount of time. These individuals are well suited to do this type of work.

LCT: Would you recommend that operators sell to this market?

Bob Levine: Absolutely. If you have fifth door, day and night vehicles, you would be able to use them to assist funeral homes. It is a tough market to get into and funeral directors are very loyal so it is not a fast sale, but I believe that it is definitely worth pursuing. The funeral business has been very good to us over the years.

LCT: You mentioned that your retail business is growing. Can you expand on that?

Bob Levine: That's correct. We've added a party bus to our fleet. We feel that if you are going to have an offering for retail it should be a complete offering and the limo bus rounded us off. We are also looking to grow our wedding business and having the limo bus will complement that business. In the past, our retail business was primarily airport transfers — people going on vacations. With the economy the way it currently is, we see a lot less of this so we are growing our wedding and night on the town business to offset that. Retail makes up about 10% of our business. Retail takes much more patience. You don't necessarily see the results as fast. You need to sell your company on the phone over and over to the client. It's like having an interview every time you pick up the phone.

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LCT: What changes have you seen in your clients?

Bob Levine: The consumer is very knowledgeable, much more than before and very much the shopper. We are seeing more people bargaining the price. We maintain our price integrity. You should have a good basis for feeling your worth. Hold your price. We will give discounts to commercial accounts due to volume. Multiple cars for a wedding, give them an airport transfer, but I feel you should have a one price business.

LCT: What are some of things you are doing to reach clients?

Bob Levine: One of the things we have done is to begin outdoor advertising — billboards which will get our name and our brand out to our clients. We have also added a sales person.

LCT: How did you go about finding a salesperson?

Bob Levine: When I started looking for a salesperson, I mentioned it to my dispatcher who had a background in sales prior to dispatching and he asked if we would give him a try. It has worked out very well because he understands the ins and outs of our business.

LCT: Is your business still family run?

Bob Levine: My sons are now involved. My father would be proud to see his grandsons involved in his business. They were only babies when he passed away. My son Matt has been working with us for two years and my son Alex has just come into the business to help us with the marketing. He has redone our website and working to optimize our rankings with search engines. They both bring in new perspectives to the business. I guess it was similar to me with my father when I came into the business. They convinced me to buy the limo bus and add SUVs to our fleet. So far their recommendations have been very good for our business.

LCT: Have you done any downsizing?

Bob Levine: We have. Not so much people, but fleet. In our funeral end, we have reduced vehicles over the past two years. The trend to move to cremations has led to the need for fewer vehicles for funerals. We have lost people that have left that we haven't replaced but we have not had to let anyone go. We are very conservative so that we don't carry the massive amounts of debts that some companies have. This has allowed us to always put back into the company and has helped a lot in the current environment.

LCT: What would you recommend to someone who comes to you wanting to start a business in this industry?

Bob Levine: That happens all of the time. Chauffeurs and dispatchers see your operation and think that they want to go out on their own. I tell them to understand what the costs are before taking the dive. I think many people don't realize what it takes to start and to stay in this business. The expense can be incredible in both money and time. Also, don't try to be everything to everyone. Find a niche market that will bring the greatest return similar to what we did with the funeral market. Finally, if you always provide outstanding service, that will help you to thrive.

Source: Linda Moore, LCT Magazine

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