



Alliance Bus Group

Along for the Whole Ride

by Larry Plachno
Photos courtesy of Alliance Bus Group

Alliance Bus Group sells many different kinds and types of buses from several locations and is increasingly getting an outstanding reputation for customer support and service. Their “Along for the Whole Ride” commitment to customers starts with the initial contact and continues through many years of ownership and operation. Shown here is the Alliance Bus Group location in Carlstadt, New Jersey, north of Newark, that serves New York and surrounding areas.

There is an old saying in the bus industry that “some mini-buses are not so much delivered as they are abandoned.” New bus owners often found themselves with no training, little help with parts and almost no support. Buying a mini-bus became an adventure for many.

The Alliance Bus Group has been a breath of fresh air in this area. Realizing that this problem existed, they set out to change things. They actually went so far as to ask their customers what they wanted and then developed their programs and policies accordingly. Alliance calls it “Along for the Whole Ride” because they are there to support the customer from their first phone call to years of service. Here is the story behind Alliance and what makes them unique.

History and Expertise

The history behind Alliance Bus Group goes back 10 years. Several of the better bus dealers began talking with each other. They

realized that there was a serious need for better customer support and service. However, their experience showed that this was difficult to accomplish by a single small dealer with limited resources. What was needed was a larger operation that had more resources and was in a better position to accomplish this.

Hence, in 2003, a consortium of leading bus dealers in strategic locations came together to form the North American Bus Dealers Alliance (NABDA), or “The Alliance” for short. As the group began working closer together, they began to see and develop some substantial improvements for customers at the local level as well as national and regional purchasers. This provided the end user with a higher level of service, increased support, and a best practices and training program, all of which substantially improved the customer experience.

Doug Dunn, CEO of Alliance Bus Group, commented on the advantages of joining

together to form a larger dealer organization. “The original goal was to combine our strengths to get better prices and financing options for our customers. It did not take long for us to realize that we had grown into more than a low price leader. With our larger size we could leverage our synergies to provide a more holistic bus ownership experience to our customers.”

It became increasingly obvious that by working together, this larger group of bus dealers discovered a synergism that enabled them to better serve their customers. They were able to take advantage of increased buying power. Their customers were better served with a larger parts inventory that was combined and shared. New options opened up because of increased product lines. Customers had a much larger range of customer experience and expertise available to help them. It was probably inevitable that this success prompted the creation of a more formal partnership that became known as Alliance Bus Group.



Corporate headquarters for Alliance Bus Group is located in College Park, Georgia, near Atlanta. A nearby facility in Forest Park specializes in Multi Function School Activity Buses. Alliance Bus Group offers a wide range of buses from smaller cutaways to transit buses and CAIO coaches.

Alliance Bus Group currently has eight locations in seven states including Georgia, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, Louisiana, Mississippi and Connecticut. The company has the largest product line of any bus dealer in the United since it includes every major commercial manufacturer in the bus industry selling in the United States as well as full-size CAIO coaches.

Headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, Alliance Bus Group has more than 150 qualified employees and offers a wide range of products and services. Included are new and used bus sales, consignments and trade-ins, an impressive parts inventory, a wide range of customer service and support, an extensive training program, financing and leasing, maintenance and even refurbishment.

Alliance Bus Group can boast about receiving several awards recently. The Atlanta Chapter of the Association for Corporate Growth is a national association focused on professional development and has features in *Georgia Trend Magazine*. ACG Georgia named Alliance Bus Group the fourth fastest growing middle-market corporation in Georgia in 2012 and the ninth fastest in 2013. Alliance Bus Group was given a 2013 Pacesetter award by the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* and recognized as one of Atlanta's 100 fastest-growing companies, placing fourteenth. Perhaps most interesting for our readers, Alliance Bus Group was recognized by Smart Business as one of 25 organizations receiving a World Class Customer Service Award based on their comprehensive customer care.

Management and Expertise

One of the most important assets of Alliance Bus Group is its management. Together, the four top management people represent more than 100 years of bus experience. Here are some details on these key people.

Doug Dunn, chairman and CEO – Dunn has been part of the bus industry for almost 30 years being involved with various manufacturers and owning dealerships. He founded Bus Group, Inc. in 2000 that would expand to become one of the largest bus

dealerships in the nation with locations in Atlanta, Georgia; Slidell, Louisiana and Jackson, Mississippi while reaching an annual sales volume of more than \$50 million.

Nick England, president – England has been a major player in the bus industry for more than 20 years. He opened Lasseter Bus Company, Inc. in 1989 in Lewisville, Texas and became known nationally for providing outstanding customer service after the sale.

Eugene Hotard, executive vice president – Hotard has been heavily involved in the transportation industry since the age of 13. He learned the bus industry on the operations and sales management side of well-known Hotard Coaches in New Orleans. He later joined International Bus Group in 2002 as the general manager in Slidell, Louisiana and went on to manage both the Louisiana and Jackson, Mississippi offices.

Andy Rolfe, executive vice president – Rolfe has been in the bus business for more than 30 years. He founded Arcola Sales and Service Corp. in 1975 in Carlstadt, New Jer-

sey and has had more than a quarter century of success. In 2008 Andy Rolfe took over ownership of First Class Coach Sales in Orlando, Florida and has had continued success with both dealerships.

Along for the Whole Ride

The thing that makes Alliance Bus Group different is both the size and the direction of management to improve the customer experience from initial contact through years of successful operation. In addition to knowledge from years of involvement in the industry, Alliance queried their customers on what they would like to see and experience. The result is a comprehensive program that Alliance Bus Group appropriately calls "Along for the Whole Ride." Here is a list of some of the various component parts of that program that highlight the customer's Lifecycle of Ownership.

Extensive Product Line

One of the biggest problems with minibuses is matching the customer to the appropriate vehicle. With dealers who have a limited product line, this often results in the proverbial square peg in the

Alliance Bus Group offers a wide range of support and service for its customers. This particular facility is dedicated to refurbishing. It can handle anything from a single bus to a fleet and virtually any size and brand of bus.





Customers give Alliance Bus Group high marks on training support. The programs cover a wide range of topics from general maintenance to technical items like air conditioning and lifts. A training program requested by customers provides a prep class for those looking to obtain a CDL license.



Customer service and support are important part of "Along for the Whole Ride." Alliance Bus Group will service the buses they sell or train customers on how to service their own buses. The result is that customers of Alliance Bus Group have buses that are more reliable and cost less to operate.

round hole. What makes Alliance Bus Group different is what can honestly be claimed as the largest product line in the country. They can offer virtually all commercial vehicles and options on the market from the smaller cutaways to full size CAIO coaches. Alliance Bus Group carries hundreds of buses in stock and can custom order any vehicle while leveraging their quantities of scale with manufacturers, often resulting in a lower overall unit cost.

Expertise

The years of experience and expertise provided by the Alliance Bus Group staff can make a major difference, particularly with smaller fleets, new buyers and unusual applications. The Alliance staff does not need to "reinvent the wheel." They have "been there, and done that." They know what works and what does not work and can guide their customers into making the right choices.

One of the major advantages in working with Alliance Bus Group is their extensive expertise in life cycle costs. Too many customers, particularly new ones and those

with smaller fleets, put too much emphasis on initial purchase price and too little on overall total cost of ownership over the life-cycle of the vehicle. Alliance Bus Group experts can explain the differences and ramifications so that customers know the options and can make an educated decision that can save them money or improve operations in the long run.

Financing

The size of Alliance Bus Group has opened several doors in the area of bus financing for customers. Alliance's volume of sales allows the company to work with a greater number of lenders that in turn provides better rates and more options. In addition, Alliance also offers its own in-house financing that may be a better fit for some customers. The in-house finance department, Alliance Bus Lease, has direct access to lenders and can often get impressively fast approval on bus loans.

The wide range of financing options available from Alliance Bus Group includes all of the standard TRAC leases as well as lease to purchase and "walk-aways." They also offer traditional loans and financing.

Due to their volume of sales, Alliance can customize financial offerings based on customer needs. Examples of unique financing would include establishing fleet lines of credit for large fleet customers and the introductory two-year walk-away lease offering on CAIO coaches.

Training

Both initial and ongoing training has become an unfortunate truth of the old joke of customer options and experience at Alliance. A major part of the old joke about buses being abandoned revolved around the lack of training offered by dealers. Alliance found that this was a major point because many bus operators suffered additional maintenance and operating costs because they simply did not know how to maintain their buses properly.

The result is that Alliance offers training sessions for customers. This includes both an initial training for buyers of new buses as well as ongoing sessions dealing with specialized subjects. Customers learn proper operation and basic preventive maintenance procedures. This lowers operating costs, reduces down time,

Alliance Bus Group stocks more than one million dollars worth of bus parts from numerous manufacturers. These parts can be shipped overnight to almost any domestic location. Future plans include an e-commerce store for online parts ordering.





Alliance Bus Group offers a very extensive product line. Their experts can look at your needs and recommend the right bus for your application. This includes buses from the smaller cutaways through larger buses and transit buses and even the CAIO intercity coach shown here.



The extensive Alliance product line runs from the small cutaway shown here to the full-size CAIO coach. In between is a wide range of buses in various sizes and capacities. Alliance Bus Group can match your needs with the right product.

extends the life of the vehicle and improves its residual value. Alliance also offers driver training and best practices that can reduce accidents and lower liability costs.

Typical specialized training sessions include an air conditioning training class for techs and operators and a class specializing in wheelchair lift training. Input from customers has added more classes to the Alliance list. One of the more popular classes is a CDL Prep Class for drivers looking for obtain a CDL license.

Service and Support

Another major area of concern for bus operators is service and support. If some-

thing goes wrong, they want to know that help is available and they are not all alone. This is a particular need with the smaller operators who may not have a full-time mechanic. One major program offered by Alliance that is praised by customers is their 24-hour service hotline. If anything goes wrong, an Alliance customer has a number they can phone at any time for help.

In addition, Alliance provides service for customers at its various facilities. This ranges from ongoing preventive maintenance to more involved mechanical items. There are more than 60 staff members in the service department. I note that Alliance also has a full-time warranty department that helps

customers obtain warranty coverage from manufacturers.

It is noteworthy that Alliance also has a facility of more than 60,000 square feet in Atlanta dedicated to refurbishing. This includes a full-size paint booth. Some refurbishing work even carries a warranty.

Parts

The need to obtain parts quickly has always been a concern for bus operators. Nothing is worse than having a bus sit idle while waiting for a part. Recognizing this need, Alliance Bus Group has put together an extensive parts operation and has pre-stocked its shelves with a variety of the most common parts.

Currently, Alliance stocks more than one million dollars worth of bus parts. These include parts from pretty much every manufacturer including some no longer in business. Parts can be shipped overnight to most domestic locations. Future plans include the development of an e-commerce store for online parts ordering.

Product Line

One of the major advantages that Alliance Bus Group offers their customers is an extensive and unique product line that is probably not duplicated elsewhere. It ranges from traditional vans through all kinds of school buses, mid-size buses and even full-size CAIO coaches. Once their experts assess your needs, they can help you pick the right vehicle.

Product lines vary from Alliance location to location but overall include Forest River, Thor, Diamond, Arboc, Supreme, Thomas, Collins, Turtle Top, Lion and the big CAIO coaches.

Alliance Bus Group serves most of the major population centers in the south and eastern states. Eight different Alliance Bus Group locations in seven different states provide support and service that is "Along for the whole ride."



If you are looking for a van, Alliance has traditional units as well as both low-floor and raised roof models. Both traditional yellow school buses as well as white Multi-Function School Activity Buses are in stock. If you are looking for a mid-size bus, Alliance can help you choose among numerous models including cutaways, low-floor buses and those built on rails. For transit applications, a wide range of buses are available including low-floor models, cutaways, those built on rails, and heavy-duty units. For full-size coaches, Alliance offers the mid-size CAIO G3400 and the full size CAIO G3600.

Locations

Alliance Bus Group has a strong presence near major cities in the south, southeast and northeast states although they do handle national accounts and have products such as the CAIO coaches that they sell nationally. Alliance has eight locations in seven states as follows.

The Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas area is served from Lewisville, Texas and New Orleans is served from nearby Slidell, Louisiana. Moving east, Alliance has a location in Jackson, Mississippi and serves central Florida from a facility in Orlando.

Corporate headquarters is in the Atlanta area in College Park, Georgia while a facility in nearby Forest Park specializes in Multi Function School Activity Buses. The Alliance Bus Group refurbishing facility is also located in the Atlanta area.

In the Northeast states, the greater New York City area is served by an Alliance



Alliance Bus Group serves the greater New Orleans area from this location in Slidell, Louisiana. A wide variety of buses are kept in stock and others can be ordered to meet specific needs. Like other Alliance Bus Group locations, it provides a wide range of service and support for customers.

facility in Carlstadt, New Jersey north of Newark. Alliance serves the area between Hartford, Connecticut and Providence, Rhode Island from a location in Bozrah, Connecticut.

Satisfied Customers

Perhaps the best thing about the Alliance "Along for the Whole Ride" program is that it has impressed bus owners and made them

loyal customers. The following words came from David Hindman, the owner of Kids' Zone Learning Center and Daycare in Marietta, Georgia. "I have been a customer of the Bus Group for four years and purchased multiple vehicles from them. I have been extremely happy with their dealership and particularly their customer service.

"My buses have had problems on multiple occasions. They've leaked, they've been in accidents, they've needed graphics and had other problems. Every single time Alliance Bus Group has gone above and beyond in making sure I was taken of and my business didn't suffer because of these issues.

"I have buses that have to be at schools at certain times to pick up children and these timeframes can't be missed. Whether they've sent people out to my location, or drove buses back up to the factory, or provided vehicles while mine are being fixed, they have never let me down or put me in a bind when I've needed them. They are experts on the local childcare laws and know some safety tips that I really appreciate since children ride my buses."

Hindman concludes, "I can call my salesman and service guy anytime and they always get back to me with a solution immediately. I will never buy a bus from anywhere else or take my bus anywhere else for service."

"Along for the Whole Ride" is something that bus operators have been seeking for years. It has clearly become a major reason for the continuing success of Alliance Bus Group. □

Looking to get more miles out of your bus? Alliance Bus Group has a facility of more than 60,000 square feet in Atlanta dedicated to refurbishing. It even includes a paint booth. Shown here is a specialized Gillig transit bus that was refurbished by Alliance Bus Group.



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9698 W Judson Road, Polo, Illinois 61064
Office: (815) 946-2341
Website: www.busmag.com