

Southern Coaches Goes the Distance with Customized Carrier Service



by Ann H. Kammerer
Photos courtesy of Southern Coaches

Located in Dothan, Alabama, Southern Coaches operates a fleet of 23 vehicles and runs about 800,000 miles annually. Their goal is to provide their customers with a safe, memorable and exceptional travel experience. Here, a 36-passenger Temsa TS 35 and a 56-passenger MCI J4500 pose in front of the company office.

There is a big file of thank you letters in John Adams' office that grows bigger every day. When asked, Adams can share a story or personal detail about the person who wrote each and every line. "We have kept thousands of letters of commendation from customers," says Adams, the president of Southern Coaches in Dothan, Alabama. "Most all those letters relate to our service, our drivers and their experiences."

For a smaller company with a staff of 45 and about 600 customers, those thousands of letters reflect Adams' commitment to providing a safe, memorable and exceptional travel experience for every single passenger. He does that, he says, through employing gracious, knowledgeable and professional staff, as well as putting first-rate motorcoaches on the road.

Customer Terri Francis describes the exceptional service she has received over the 14 years she has contracted with Southern Coaches. "They make you feel special," says Francis, director of 50 Forward Ministry of First United Methodist Church. "It's very com-

forting to look and see your bus pulling in with another vehicle right in front of it. It's John, and he's coming to make sure that everything is in order for our trip. He makes sure I have his personal number so I can call him directly if I'm unhappy with anything. I can say in all these years, I've never had to do that."

Getting started

The road to becoming Alabama's premier carrier was paved by G. Milton Adams, John's father. From 1956 until 1989, Milton owned a regional truck line, driving and coordinating the transport of limited truckloads between Alabama, Florida, Georgia and Mississippi. Named GFA Transportation for the three states it served—Georgia, Florida and Alabama – the company later expanded to Tennessee, Mississippi and Louisiana.

John says his dad was also a transportation hobbyist and kept an MCI motorcoach at the family home. The first coach Milton bought was a GM Silverside, the second a GM 4104. In 1971, John's father purchased an MCI MC-7. John remembers seeing his

dad behind the wheel, and how his dad sometimes took him along for the ride.

"We had it set up as an entertainer day coach, and he used it to take customers on appreciation trips," says John. "It was a hobby for Daddy to have a motorcoach. While some people might have a boat or a plane, he had a motorcoach."

John worked alongside his dad and brother, George, in running the family business. As a teenager, he drove trucks during the summer and on high school breaks. Occasionally, he worked in the shop. Later, right after graduating, he worked on the sales side, helping to build the customer base.

When the trucking and bussing industry began to change from a regulated to deregulated industry in the 1980s, John's father decided to take the family's livelihood in a different direction. In 1989, Milton sold the truck line and applied for charter authority. Within a year, he founded the family-owned and operated Southern Coaches. "We started it from ground zero,"



John D. Adams represents the second generation at Southern Coaches and serves as company president.

says John. "Daddy decided to let me run the company, too."

The Adams purchased an MC-9 MCI motorcoach to go with the one they owned, and set out to build the business with just two vehicles. The first year, they picked up an account with a local travel agency that was looking for a dependable charter company. "She had a bunch of trips and not enough buses," said Adams. "So she called us and we started a business relationship. By the end of 1990, we had so much business that we increased our fleet to seven buses."

That first year, Adams said, set the course for their business model. Instead of opening a tour division and going into competition with tour operators and travel agencies, Adams decided to keep overhead down and simply concentrate on providing transportation services. "Our advertising and our marketing campaign sent the message that we would not compete with them," says Adams of the tour and travel agencies in his immediate region. "Instead, we would just offer the transport to support their tours."

Southern Coaches grew. Then it grew more. For the first three years, the company purchased used buses. In 1992, business was so strong that the company was able to purchase their very first brand-new vehicle: a 40-foot MCI 102C3. "We've been able to add new vehicles ever since," says Adams. "We also still serve some of the original tour operator customers we did in those first few years."

Southern Coaches generated that customer loyalty, Adams says, by being a carrier and charter consultant for tour companies, schools, businesses, churches and other organizations.



George Adams serves as company vice president and safety director as well as handling payroll and payables.

Dothan High School, for instance, has relied on Southern Coaches for more than 20 years to transport hundreds of students a year on spring trips and school-related excursions. "They've taken our band all over the country," says Steve McLendon, band director for Dothan High School, of trips that range from Dallas to Virginia Beach to Chicago. "He started his business here and we're both in the same town. That was our original rationale, but we've seen that Southern Coaches is a first-class operation with top-of-the-line, well-maintained equipment, operated by outstanding people."



Kristy Merritt is the director of marketing for Southern Coaches. The company has more than 600 customers.

Rolling forward

Southern Coaches today has a fleet of 23 vehicles that log nearly 800,000 miles a year. While buses with the Southern Coaches logo have ventured to 48 states, 80 percent of the mileage occurs in the Southeast, including Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, North and South Carolina, and the company's home state of Alabama.

The company's fleet is dominated by 17 56-passenger or 47-passenger motorcoaches manufactured by Motor Coach Industries or Prevost. All motorcoaches are climate controlled and feature an array of amenities such

The fleet of Southern Coaches is dominated by MCI J4500 coaches and Tamsa TS 35 coaches. Newer coaches in the fleet offer 110-volt outlets, Wi-Fi and USB ports. Southern Coaches also has an MCI with a special luxury interior seating 30 passengers.



as public service address systems, reclining seats, window shades, tinted windows, magazine nets, reading lamps, card tables, clean lavatories, video systems, front kneeling features and stereo CD players. "We're also transitioning to offering Wi-Fi in all our coaches, as well as 110-volt outlets and USB ports," says Adams. "Eventually, we're going to offer satellite TV. A younger generation of riders demands we have those amenities."

A 30-passenger luxury MCI day coach is also available to transport customers in style on longer trips or for other special or business occasions. Amenities include a bar area with microwave, ice maker, refrigerator, coffee maker, a sofa and two granite card table booths. The 1990 MCI 102C3 Adams says, features panoramic windows, DVD/CD players, plush reclining seats, and is fully equipped for the digital age with WiFi and plug-in electrical outlets.

Looking to accommodate the growing small group tour market, Southern Coaches recently explored adding more mid-size coaches to their fleet. "It was simply becoming cost-prohibitive to operate a large coach for smaller groups," says Adams. "We felt that if we could offer our customers a quality piece of equipment it would catch on."

Adams shopped around and went with TEMSA. "We felt the TEMSA product was the best mid-sized coach on the market," he says. "Even though it's manufactured overseas, it's still made with American components."

The company originally bought two TS 35 coaches for starters, and then bought a third in less than a year. More and more customers got word of the new vehicles, and began requesting the smooth ride of the two-axle coach. Adams, too, had reconfigured the 40-foot coaches for 36 passengers rather than 40, creating an ambiance that felt cozy and spacious at the same time. "People love that extra space," says Adams. "You gain about 1.5 inches per seat by dropping four seats."

Craig Colley, owner of Atlanta's Southern Touch Tours, agrees that his customers love seeing the new TEMSA buses roll up to the curb. Colley has contracted with Adams for going on 22 years to transport about 75 groups a year on one- to 14-day trips to places like Washington, D.C.; Charleston, North Carolina; Branson, Missouri; New England; Mackinac Island, Michigan; the American West and New Orleans. "The new smaller 36-passenger buses are great for our smaller groups," says Colley who specializes in developing customized tours for the senior market. "They're a comfortable ride, and we like that we can request drivers, too."

Rounding out the Southern Coaches fleet are two RTS transit buses and a 29-passenger, 35-foot M1235 mid-size passenger bus made by General Coach America. The variety of coaches and sizes, Adams says, adds



The maintenance crew for Southern Coaches includes (left to right) Ronnie Kelley, maintenance director; Kevin Bass, head mechanic; Danny Brooks, mechanic; Earl Tyson, head cleaning crew and Cameron Lynn, body shop.

to the versatility of transport services Southern Coaches can provide, from large conventions to small family reunions. Customers set the agenda, he says, underscoring the company's philosophy that customer needs come first. "We don't specialize in any destination," says Adams. "We're charter only, and we'll go wherever you want to go."

Building business

By keeping customers top-of-mind, Southern Coaches has built a broad but targeted business base. About 45 percent of the company's customers come from K-12 schools, 30 percent are tour operators and group leaders, and the remainder comprises



The office staff at Southern Coaches includes Christy Strain, charter sales; Belinda Benak, charter sales and Kay Kornegay, office manager and accounts receivable.

colleges, churches and individual groups. Southern Coaches also works with occasional corporate clients, providing shuttle transportation to and from airports as well as motorcoach service between destinations.

"We stay in contact with our customers on a regular basis," says Adams. "We call them periodically once a trip is booked, and we follow-up with most afterward to see if everything went according to their expectations."

Adams says he is constantly looking to improve, as well as to educate the public and regular travelers that all bus companies are

After shopping around for a mid-size coach, John Adams decided on the Temsa TS 35. The company initially purchased two Temsas and then came back for a third. Here, Tim Guilden from CH Bus Sales delivers the first two Temsas to John Adams in late 2012.



not the same. He and his staff regularly encourage people to visit Southern Coaches facilities, and to compare the company's capabilities and services with other companies they may be considering for their transportation needs. "We try to educate people that price is not always the best way to select a company," says Adams. "Usually, the cheapest is the cheapest."

Adams takes great measures to ensure the highest standards of care and maintenance of his fleet. He starts by providing covered facilities for buses on the ready line, as well as an onsite shop with five maintenance bays and a separate wash and fuel building. That care does not go unnoticed.

"The buses are always clean and they're in great shape," says Debbie Thornton, business manager for Houston Academy in Dothan, Alabama. "They seem brand new even when they're not." Thornton has chartered motorcoach tours with Southern Coaches for 20 years or more. One or more of Adam's fleet takes students ranging from pre-school through 12th grade on field trips, to festivals, to athletic events, and on week-long college tours for junior and seniors. She says her school has checked out other carrier services and was never as pleased with the services as they are with Southern Coaches. "They're our go-to company," she says of Southern Coaches. "We've never had any complaints."

Staff professionalism, safety, cleanliness and preventive maintenance are all points of pride for Southern Coaches. A 50-point inspection is conducted on every vehicle that returns from a trip, regardless of whether it is gone for one day or three weeks. Starters are changed every year, and other major components are changed before they fail. Two full-time mechanics, two maintenance helpers and a supervisor regularly attend Webinars and training for particular makes and models, with full-time mechanics certified on air brakes, electrical and other specialty components.

Those kinds of practices, Adams says, are what earned Southern Coaches a number one rating issued by the Military Traffic Management Command of the Department of Defense, and assured them status as the only TSX Certified Carrier in Alabama. Southern Coaches, too, has maintained the highest safety rating through the U.S. Department of Transportation since the company put its first carrier on the road in 1989.

Southern Coaches is a member of the United Motorcoach Association, American Bus Association and the International Motorcoach Group, with membership contingent on maintaining strict standards. Southern Coaches is also a member of the Alabama Motor Coach Association where John Adams currently serves as president. Adams says that four major manufacturers of coaches he owns have commented that his company's equipment is maintained better than average. His investment in keeping the interior and exteriors free of nicks and pings and scratches has paid off, with buyers of transportation equipment frequently calling to see if he has equipment for sale.

Vendors, too, tend to view Southern Coaches as a fair and loyal company. Bill Kaiser, president of Toyo Motor Coach Tire Sales out of Atlanta, says he would rate Southern Coaches in the top one percent of the more than 200 companies he has serviced. He can still remember the first meeting he had with the company when he met with John's father, Milton, in the late 1980s. "I realized then that to be a vendor with Southern Coaches was more than just being a supplier," says Kaiser. "It was being welcomed into a family of trusted vendors."

George Adams, John's brother, is the company's safety director and processes payroll as well as handling accounts payable. John Adams credits his staff with leading the way into the next generation of business. His company, he says, hasn't experienced much turnover, with a few staff retiring and others building skills and moving within the ranks. "All of us want the customer to be so satisfied that they wouldn't even think of calling anyone else," says Adams of his company and his staff. "We want to be the first choice for our customers and to set the standard for everyone else." □

The maintenance staff at Southern Coaches includes two full-time mechanics, two maintenance helpers and a supervisor. They regularly attend Webinars and training sessions. When coaches return from a trip, they are given a 50-point inspection regardless of their time away.



The covered "Ready Line" at Southern Coaches keeps the coaches out of the hot sun in the summer time and allows them to cool down quicker in the shade. There are 12 slots for parking which seems to be adequate since rarely are more than 12 coaches in the yard at any one time.



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