

Variety is the Spice of Life for Creative Mobile Interiors

by Barbara Wayman
Photos courtesy of CMI

This photo shows the interior of an MCI E4500 coach CMI converted for the Free Enterprise System in Jeffersonville, Indiana. A two-and-one seating arrangement in the front lounge area of the coach provides for 14 passengers. The leather seats have electronic controls, pull-out tables and can recline a full 45 degrees.



Starting from early childhood, there has never been a time when Owen Connaughton was not interested in vehicle interiors, whether it was dreaming up designs, drawing out floor plans or actually building layouts throughout his 14-year tenure at conversion industry founder Custom Coach Corporation. Connaughton, a New York City native, worked his way up at Custom Coach from cabinetmaker to lead man to engineer to plant manager of the company's second facility. The diverse positions taught him a lot about all aspects of the modification process, and only served to fuel his enthusiasm for high-end conversion design and production.

In 1999, Connaughton founded Creative Mobile Interiors (CMI), a custom conversion company based in Grove City, Ohio. CMI specializes in converting motorcoaches, vans, trailers and minicoaches into spacious, comfortable luxury vehicles outfitted with top-of-the-line amenities and electronics. The company also designs and builds head-turning mobile marketing vehicles on a variety of shell platforms, including the Freightliner Sprinter cargo van and the Cadillac Escalade, among others.

"My motivation for founding Creative Mobile Interiors really was to bring custom conversion to a wider audience. With experienced craftsmen, production efficiencies

and design talent, I felt we'd be able to make custom conversion work affordable for people at many budget levels," said Connaughton.

One of the things that makes CMI unique in the conversion world is that it offers unlimited options when it comes to vehicle interiors. Not only will the company modify any vehicle a customer wants, they also have no set floor plans to choose from. Every vehicle is designed to meet the needs of one specific customer.

"We don't believe in putting boundaries on our customers' dreams," said Connaughton. "We have no cookie-cutter



Cabinetmaker Mike Raynor sands the wood for a window treatment. Raynor has been with CMI for several years and worked at Custom Coach Corporation before that.



One of the upholsterers, Robyn Johnson, sews some leather for upholstered seating that is hand-crafted on site. Johnson is another Custom Coach Corporation alumna.

designs here. Each customer receives a top quality coach that emerges from an individualized design process."

CMI is now one of the fastest growing custom motorcoach conversion companies in the U.S. Since its founding with two employees, Connaughton and Mike Beyea, plant manager, CMI has doubled its sales each year to more than \$2.5 million in 2004. It now has a staff of 27, which includes cabinetmakers, upholsterers, electricians, service technicians and staff working in interior design, marketing, administration and sales. Many of the employees came from Custom Coach Corporation, which went through bankruptcy in 2001.

"We took a risk at that time because we didn't have the business volume to support as many people as we hired, but we took the gamble because we didn't want to miss the opportunity to hire such highly experienced craftsmen," said Connaughton. The gamble paid off, however, as new and varied conversion projects streamed in, forcing the company to expand into three separate facilities – a 10,000-square foot production showroom for coach conversions, a 4,000-square foot plant for Sprinter conversion and a 3,000-square foot service facility. All the buildings are located within one-half mile of each other in Grove City, but CMI hopes to centralize them in a yet-to-be-built 24,000-square foot headquarters sometime next year.

CMI's rapid expansion has been built project by project, each job constructed start-to-finish onsite. The company started out performing mostly retrofits. While retrofits and service jobs are still welcomed, CMI's bays now also hold full conversion jobs for corporate clients and motor home enthusiasts. The projects vary in scope and function. Company employees have performed work for some famous names including Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, the Doobie

Brothers, the Four Tops and the rock band Korn.

Some Wild Rides

As you might expect with its being located just south of Columbus, CMI has built more than one Buckeye-themed bus for fans of the Ohio State University football team. A recent Buckeye bus was built for a handful of tailgater enthusiasts who pooled their resources for the ultimate in tailgating luxury. This unit, a school bus in a former life, was converted to seat 18 passengers on leather and ultraleather scarlet and gray upholstered recliners and sofas. CMI installed a 27-inch flatscreen television in the front of the unit and a 500-watt stereo, to make sure no one misses the sights or sounds of the action. For even more com-

fort, the unit included an oversize 12-volt cooler, microwave, DVD/VCR/CD player and on-board lavatory. Naturally, the exterior was done in scarlet and gray, but CMI even installed a horn that plays 18 different sounds including the OSU fight song, to let the owners celebrate every touchdown.

Charter coach owners usually prefer a decor that is more toned down from a tailgater unit. CMI is currently working on its second unit for Jeffersonville, Indiana-based Free Enterprise System, Inc., a 115-coach charter business. The Free Enterprise System wanted to offer their customers a very upscale, luxurious vehicle for short-term leasing; CMI designed and modified a 45-foot MCI E model to meet their needs. The unit includes 14 tan leather reclining aircraft

This is the rear lounge on the MCI E4500 converted by CMI for Free Enterprise System. At the rear of the coach is a 45-inch plasma television. It also has a fully automated control system which automatically dims lights, lowers window shades and adjusts the THX movie theater sound with the push of a button.





CMI created this prototype interior for the new Airstream A37 motor home. The all-electric, 37-foot vehicle features clean lines and a restrained color scheme. Partially visible is the oversize circular mirror which dominates the rear bedroom.



Among the most unusual projects at CMI were three Cadillac Escalades built as mobile marketing vehicles for Hewlett Packard and iPod. Equipment included multiple LCD screens, a DJ roof rack and more than 5,200 watts of stereo surround sound.

seats in the front lounge, set in a two-and-one configuration. A drop-down, 50-inch plasma television entertains riders, and high quality appointments such as faux ostrich vinyl ceiling panels, faux leopard print roman shades and soft carpeting create an elegant environment.

The center galley features a refrigerator, cooktop, microwave and coffee maker set into African mahogany ribbon laminate walls. Granite floors and counters continue the upscale look. The rear stateroom has a 45-inch plasma television and a fully automated control system that automatically dims lights, lowers window shades and adjusts the THX movie theater sound with the push of a button. Additional seating is offered at a dinette with chocolate colored leather bench seating that converts to sleeping space.

"We consider this the crown jewel of our fleet," said Noah Sodrel, president of the Free Enterprise System. "It has generated a lot of interest from our clients and gives us more flexibility in booking jobs that require extremely comfortable and attractive transport."

Probably the wildest looking units that CMI has built to date were three mobile marketing vehicles for Hewlett Packard and iPod. An agency representing the corporation approached CMI with the idea of showcasing the Apple iPod to a young, hip-hop urban demographic. The results are some of the most eye-catching Cadillac Escalades on the road today. CMI ultimately built three mobile marketing vehicles, each packed with multiple LCD screens, a DJ roof rack, interactive kiosks and more than 5,200 watts of stereo surround sound. Although they originally were standard Cadillac Escalade ESV's, a custom ground effects package, including fiberglass bumpers and hood scoop, was combined with a neon green and

black graphics wrap to create vehicles with a racy, energetic look.

Designed to allow users to handle and sample digital entertainment products, listen to music played by the rooftop DJ and click and print photos of themselves at a digital photography platform. To help the units stand out even more, they were outfitted with custom-built, 24-inch spinner rims, ultra low-profile tires and removable winged awning canopies.

"These are some of the flashiest vehicles we've done so far," said Andy Mauck, director of Sales and Business Development for CMI. Mauck spearheaded the HP iPod project, and brings a depth of experience to the company as the inventor of the Mauck Special Vehicle, or MSV. Mauck founded and ran Mauck Special Vehicles in Columbus

from 1991 to 1998, and also spent 12 years in the custom fire truck industry as project engineer for Sutphen Corporation, before joining CMI in mid-2004.

Among some of the more unusual requests CMI has received in the past few years include a compartment located underneath the main floor of a motorcoach so a client could have a place for his dog to roam.

Overcoming Challenges

The high-end conversion market is notoriously difficult to break into, mainly because so many start-ups do not succeed, making customers wary of spending a significant amount of money with anyone not long established. A faltering national economy, rising fuel prices and a decline in travel following 9/11 also presented CMI with business challenges throughout its five-year his-

This photo shows the exterior of the CMI Headquarters in Grove City, Ohio. The two 21-foot Sprinter vans parked in front are significant since CMI was the first company to do a conversion of the Freightliner Sprinter. Long-term plans call for constructing a larger facility to bring all operations under one roof.



tory. Yet CMI has not had a down year, thanks to new product development and a focus on its points of difference, namely creative floor plans, high quality craftsmanship and personalized customer service.

"We pride ourselves on our versatility," said Connaughton. You name it, we can do it. It is not unusual for us to be hired to perform work others have turned away as too unrealistic or too complicated. We're masters at getting 10 pounds of nails into a five-pound bucket," said Connaughton.

In terms of craftsmanship, CMI uses no particle board; all its structural wood is marine quality plywood. Its cabinets are engineered to minimize weight while maintaining structural integrity. Fuel tanks, water storage tanks, basement compartments, electrical harnesses and plumbing are all incorporated to provide easy access yet rugged rattle-free security. To ensure a quiet ride, ceilings and walls are insulated and two types of composite underlayment are used below floors.

CMI's interest in developing new products led them to become the first to perform a luxury conversion of the Freightliner Sprinter cargo van, which became available in the U.S. in November of 2001. Since then, CMI has seen the 21-foot van emerge as a popular conversion platform. Designed and powered by Mercedes-Benz, CMI calls its Sprinter creations "Sprinter PLVs," or personal luxury vehicles. With a 2.7-liter turbocharged, five-cylinder diesel engine, the Sprinter is the most fuel-efficient van of its class, and can be equipped with a wide range of amenities, not unlike a full-size coach conversion. European leather seating,



CMI President and founder Owen Connaughton is shown seated in the Airstream conversion. Connaughton spent 14 years working with Custom Coach Corp. prior to founding CMI.

maple hardwood floors, laminate walls, Corian® countertops and a host of electronic amenities are the norm for customers who choose CMI for their Sprinter conversion.

The Road Ahead

CMI's future plans are to continue to design and build durable, unique vehicles for corporation, charter services, entrepreneurs and individuals. The company has built a relationship with Ohio-based Airstream, builders of distinctive silver bullet-shaped motor homes for more than 70 years. CMI recently completed a proto-

type conversion to help Airstream break into the higher end conversion market.

While CMI has room for continued steady growth over the next several years, it intends to always focus on custom craftsmanship and painstaking detail, to deliver vehicles that are as unique as the people who buy them.

"We're not interested in being the biggest," said Connaughton. "Only the best." □

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