

**T**he number one question we are being asked by bus operators is: "How do we increase our business once we have our buses operating again?" While there may be several answers to this question, our quick and simple answer is to expand into bus tour operations. Let me give you three reasons for our suggestion:

One is that as bus operations ramp up again, there will be substantial competition for charters. This will drive charter prices down and profits down. Planning and running bus tours is less competitive and gets you out of the rat race for cheap charters.

A second advantage is that bus tours are a win/win situation. You can make money on the tour and you make money by running your bus at a good rate.

The third advantage is that bus tours can often be scheduled to suit your own needs. For example, you can run tours on days or seasons when your charters or routes are slow. When we ran Wisconsin Illinois Stages, our busy days for routes were Friday and Sunday while Saturday was usually the day for charters. Hence, we ran most tours from Monday to Thursday, sometimes leaving one open day each week for any bus scheduled in for maintenance.

Here are some quick suggestions for getting you started with planning bus tours or at least thinking about planning and running bus tours. The pros and experts could probably write a book on this and will consider this shallow and short. But, there is enough here to get you interested. One basic recommendation I have is to start with one-day tours and expand into multiple-day tours as your customer list grows and you feel more confident.

• **Where to Go?** – Getting ideas for tours is easier than you think. One of the best places is to ask the tour passengers on your buses. Since you have a captive audience, we always passed out flyers and booklets with our future tours. At the same time you can ask for ideas on where they would like to go in the future. If you are thinking about specialized tours, then go to appropriate groups and organizations. For example, if you want to plan a faith-based tour then visit church groups and ask what would interest them. If you have an interest in a tour of military attractions, then visit the American Legion or VFW to get ideas. If you want to hear what would interest seniors, then stop in at nearby senior centers.

You can also look through the pages of BUS TOURS MAGAZINE to find places that encourage bus tours. If you are not already on the mailing list you can surf to [www.Bus-ToursMagazine.com](http://www.Bus-ToursMagazine.com), click on Subscribe, and fill out the form. If you have questions or have problems signing up, send an e-mail to [NationalBusTrader@gmail.com](mailto:NationalBusTrader@gmail.com).

# Time To Think Tours

## ...for increasing bus income

*By Larry Plachno*



As we move back to the new normal, many bus operators are looking for ways to increase bus mileage and income. Charters can be competitive, and hence not highly profitable. One possible solution is to plan and operate bus tours. In addition to making money on the tour and running your bus, they can be planned to fill in when your fleet is less active and looking for work. PREVOST.

• **Duration** – I have seen bus tours run as long as 40 days, but that would be either driving to Alaska or running cross country and return. If you are new at planning bus tours, I would suggest you start with one-day tours and work up from there. Anything beyond 10 days or two weeks is highly questionable unless you have some specialized customers.

• **Attractions and Stops** – Make sure that they are suitable for bus groups or the group you are planning for. For example, fishing, golfing and bowling are not good ideas on a conventional tour; not everyone is interested and there is no room for sports equipment on the bus. Make sure that restaurants and historical homes have room

for a group of your size. Depending on your group, you may also want to look at how much walking is involved, whether there are a lot of steps or a nearby elevator, and other limitations.

Many of the larger tour planning operations have scouts who will drive the planned bus tour and report back to the tour planners on quality or concerns with lodging, restaurants and attractions. If you do not have a scout, you need to get information when you are booking. Another alternative is to use places that are in BUS TOURS MAGAZINE since they are obviously encouraging bus tours to come.

• **Meals** – Most bus tours will allow time for three meals a day but they may not

be included in the price of the tour. Unless the hotel provides breakfast with the rooms, breakfast may not be included in the tour because many people are only looking for a cup of coffee or a doughnut. One friend who ran tours for seniors always included a good dinner every night and a lunch about half of the time. His philosophy was that many of the tours were paid for by the children of the passengers and they wanted mom and dad to be fed while traveling. Many tour planners like cafeterias because they charge a flat fee, which can be included in the tour price, and the meal is quicker because there is no need to order and wait for food to be cooked. It can also be helpful to arrange a meal at an attraction or hotel to avoid a special stop at a restaurant.

- **Lodging** – Tours we deal with will spend the night at a motel or hotel. Normally, there are two people and two beds in a room, sometimes called double doubles. If a passenger wants a room to themselves they are charged extra, often called a single supplement. With student tours, they normally put four kids in a room with two beds. Some hotels will assist with moving luggage in and out.

- **Group Rates and Comps** – Most of the places that deal regularly with bus groups will offer group rates. In the old days this was often a percentage but today it is generally just a lower rate if you bring enough people at the same time. If a group rate is not mentioned, you should ask for it. Comps (short for complimentary) are not set in concrete but do tend to follow traditional guidelines. With restaurants and attractions the usual arrangement is that the bus driver and tour escort are free with groups beyond a given size. With lodging, you normally get a free room for booking a given number of rooms (often 25) but the number may vary.

- **Booking** – On occasion you may find a “package” that is suitable for your group. This would involve a combination of stops and might include multiple attractions, a hotel and one or more meals. Other than things like this, you will need to contact or book each individual stop on your tour. Some will require an initial deposit or payment. Make sure you understand their terms and when a payment is due. Hotels and motels will generally require a rooming list of your passengers prior to arrival. If payment is due on arrival, you should ask whether they accept a company check or credit card. Some locations still provide a poop sheet or information sheet with contact information, rates and other data that can be e-mailed to you.

Unless you are sure that the location is group-friendly, such as seeing them in *BUS TOURS MAGAZINE*, this is the time to ask about such things. Is the historical home or restoration big enough for a group of yours?



While most bus tours allow time for three meals daily, they may not be included in the price of the tour. This shows part of the dining room at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island where your group can stop for their excellent luncheon. GRAND HOTEL.

size? Do restaurants have enough space for your group? Can your group have a private dining or meeting room? Can the hotel help with moving bags in and out? Is safe, nearby parking for your bus included? If not, what are the alternatives?

As mentioned earlier, one of the best things you can do is to send a scout out to “scout” the route before actually planning the tour. This person checks the attractions, restaurants and hotels to make sure they are of sufficient quality and suitable for groups. In most cases, the various locations will “comp” the scout which tends to reduce your costs. If you do not have a scout, and many smaller tour planners do not, just be careful in selecting where you want to stop.

- **Parking and Regulations** – There are several things you need to look for when planning a tour but the two at the top of the list are bus parking and local regulations. Whenever you book any kind of stop, make sure you know about bus parking. Most suburban or rural motels and attractions have large parking lots but it does not hurt to confirm this. Restaurants can be a problem. As a general rule, we always are concerned about locations inside a city. If you are asked to park your bus in a remote or unsafe location, you might be better off looking for a different hotel.

As somewhat of a side note, some tour planners do what is known as a hub-and-spoke tour where their group stays at a motel in a safe suburban or rural location. But, each day they get on the bus to drive to a nearby attraction or other suitable group stop. This gives the passengers the advantage of continuity in staying in the same safe place every night.

You should also keep in mind that there are some cities that have regulations on parking, tour guides or other restrictions. New York City, Washington, D.C. and Chicago fall into this category but there are others. Watch for these regulations and plan accordingly.

- **Rest Stops** – In planning travel, allow time for rest stops along the way. Not everyone is comfortable using the rest room on the bus so you do need to stop at a rest area along the interstate if you are traveling. Timing between stops can vary by type of group. If you put off a stop for too long, the passengers will let you know.

If you have a tour where you expect to spend all day driving, a favorite tour planner idea is to stop for a while at lunch time at an outlet mall. This gives both the passengers and driver a break, it lets them use a rest room off of the bus, and gives them time for lunch at the food court. Some outlet malls will even give you discount coupons if you ask.

- **Gaming** – To some extent, gaming falls into a special category. It is one of the best targets for one-day tours. In fact, if location and distance works out, some bus companies run daily or frequent service to a gaming facility. In some cases, this almost amounts to scheduled service.

Note that some gaming facilities have special programs for bus tours. Some will offer a special deal to the passengers. Others have been known to offer a special deal or compensation to the bus company provided certain requirements are met. It does not hurt to talk to these people and see what they have to offer.

- **Quality** – Yes, there are different levels of quality to tours and some tour planners are known for higher quality or economical tours. A good rule of thumb is to try to provide value for the money you charge. In lodging, most tour planners stay inside of a central range. If the quality of your motel drops too low, it will displease your passengers. If you book high-priced rooms, you will limit the number of people interested in that tour. However, I will mention that some of those “high priced” rooms suddenly come down in price when a group becomes interested on days when a lot of rooms are empty.



Quality can also vary based on the number of meals and type of meals provided. There are tours that provide almost no meals and others that will make you gain weight. It is pretty much up to the tour planner or company policy. In our case, we had previously worked with a large company specializing in senior tours and adopted some of their standards. Our general policy was to provide a good dinner each night and a good lunch, generally on alternate days. While we rarely provided breakfast – unless it was included with the rooms – we gave the passengers time for breakfast or for a lunch if it was not provided. It was difficult to include meals in the price of a tour if they were ordered off of a menu. Hence, we would sometimes set up “family style” meals where different foods were provided and each passenger could help themselves.

- **Staff** – If you want to go into bus tours, there are basically three staff positions you need to fill but two of them can be part time and the third can be combined with other work. First, you need someone to actually plan the tours, make the bookings, and hopefully get marketing started. This is probably the most critical position but it need not be full time. While planning bus tours is not rocket science, you do need someone who can develop the necessary skills.

The second position is the individual who takes the bookings on the phone or from your Website. Will you accept both checks and credit cards? Do they need to pay up front when booking or can they make a

reservation and pay later? While this person should be around during business hours, you can also combine these duties with someone already on your staff – like a receptionist or bookkeeper.

The third position is the tour guide or tour escort. This is not full time since you only need a tour guide on the days you are running tours. It helps a great deal if you can find someone who is outgoing and enjoys working with people. It also helps if they can become knowledgeable about the area of the tour and the stops so that they can answer the obvious questions that come up.

Traditionally, the tour guide or tour escort is the one who jumps off of the bus at the hotel to get the room keys and counts noses when people get back on to make sure no one is missing. They have also been the on-board activities director. However, with increasing use of WiFi and 110-volt outlets, more and more passengers are bringing along laptops, iPads and iPhones that provide personal entertainment while underway.

- **Getting Started** – Unless you already have bus tour planning experience, the best place to start is with planning and offering one-day tours. Typical ideas for one-day tours include shopping, gaming and a popular attraction or two. Marketing can include brochures and flyers, giving out information to passengers on board, mailings, newspapers, yellow pages, Websites and talking to groups. Actually, marketing is a topic in itself and might be covered at a later date.

As you become familiar and successful with one-day tours you can move up into two- and three-day tours and eventually into longer tours. If a tour is reasonably successful, do not be afraid to run it again next year or even more than once a year. We found that word-of-mouth advertising was very helpful in this area. Someone who had been on the tour will tell others about it and you may end up running the same tour for several years.

- **Specialized Tours** – Once you feel comfortable with standard or conventional tours, you can move into more specialized tours, particularly if your customers ask for them. There are more types of specialized tours than I could name or remember. Gaming and Faith Based tours probably lead the list but others might include tours for photographers, people looking for antiques, fall foliage trips, shopping and holiday events. Established tour planners sometimes run mystery tours once you have a good customer base. Even though they are a mystery, you should still provide hints on whether the passengers should bring any special clothing or swimming gear.

When we operated Wisconsin Illinois Stages we put together a two-day tour just for the fun of it that we called “Europe in Wisconsin.” We spent two days just cruising around eastern Wisconsin and stopping in towns that were named after European countries. Attractions included a canning factory, a tree nursery and a cheese distributor. Two of the stops were for meals. Par-

If you are new at planning bus tours, the best place to start is with simple one-day tours. Once you build up customers and experience, you can move into longer and more elaborate tours. In addition to conventional tours, you can also offer various types of specialized tours for customers who may be interested in something a little different. PREVOST.





ticipants could return home and tell their friends that they had just come back from Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark and Poland. I drove this tour and had as much fun as the passengers.

- **Pricing** – The general observations are that if you keep your prices lower, you should get more bookings but will make less money per passengers. Higher rates will give you more income but may reduce the number of bookings. There are several ways to price tours including adding a percentage or a flat fee to costs to generate a profit, or develop a formula based on a minimum number of bookings.

We usually did a combination of both. We would pick a minimum number of passenger bookings (higher for generic tours, lower for specialized tours), add in a generous amount for the coach and add in a profit factor. What made our situation possibly a little different is that we had a bus in our fleet with a 29-passenger party coach interior. Hence, in some cases we could decide to run a tour with a smaller group and use the 29-passenger coach. Obviously, as you booked more passengers, your profit goes up. I remember once getting so many bookings for a tour to Mackinac Island that we gave in and ran two buses on that tour.

- **Fly-Drive and Foreign Tours** – Once you get comfortable with tour planning, you can consider longer distances. A fly-drive tour is where you put your passengers on a plane and they fly to another city where they get off the plane and get on a bus for their tour. The negative on this is that you probably will not be using your own bus for the tour. The positive is that you give your customers more types of tours to choose from.

The easiest fly-drive to plan is Hawaii. Not only do you not need a passport but you can work with a receptive operator in the islands to do all of the work. Alaska can be a popular tour but it is hard to plan. You might consider working with John Hall's Alaska because they specialize in Alaskan tours.

- **Seating** – While we never had serious problems in this area, some tour operators have had customer concerns over seating. We did the usual thing and operated on a "first come, first served" basis with seat selection. I have talked with tour operators who rotate passengers one seat pair each time they stop. Although this is more likely to be found with scheduled routes, I have heard of people getting assigned seats when they first book the tour. The problem of seat selection did not come up with us so we really never established a policy on this.

- **Planning and Marketing Timing** – How far in advance should I plan and market tours? With one-day tours you can probably get by with 60 or 90 days if you have a



Tour Guides or Tour Escorts were traditionally the on-board activities directors to keep passengers occupied unless they were watching something on the entertainment system. Today, many passengers bring along a laptop, iPad or iPhone to take advantage of the coach WiFi and 110-volt power and provide their own entertainment. PREVOST.

good marketing program. As tours get longer you need to plan more in advance. Specialized tours may take a little longer to sell than generic and general tours. Some of the big tour planners have three major catalogs annually: Summer, Fall Foliage and Holidays, and Spring Getaways. Most everyone today also puts their tours on their Website which has the advantage that adding more photos or information does not increase costs significantly. Printed brochures can be passed out on your bus and

at meetings with organizations and potential customers. Like most everything else, once you have done it a few times it gets easier.

- **Questions** – We can try to handle questions. If we do not have the answer, maybe we can get an expert who knows. Or, if you have an interest in bus tour marketing, we can tackle that in an article. Send inquiries to [NationalBusTrader@gmail.com](mailto:NationalBusTrader@gmail.com) and we will try to respond. □

Some tour planners get passenger requests for particular seats or different seating arrangements. Depending on concerns you may have several options including rotating seating during the trip or letting customers pick assigned seats when they book. MCI.



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