HOW TO GIVE YOUR COMPANY THE DRIVE IT NEEDS

THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY USED IN THE RIGHT WAY CAN GIVE YOU A GENEROUS RETURN ON YOUR INVESTMENT.

By John M. Greene

Today, it would be hard to argue that the three most important elements to running a successful ground transportation business would be, in no particular order: Reliable vehicles, reliable drivers, and reliable reservation software.

Whereas 25 years ago you would have said the tools of success were reliable vehicles, reliable drivers… and a reliable box of push-pins.

There wasn't a limousine company back then that didn't have a wall adorned with an oversized corkboard, impaled with 30-35 slips of paper showing everything coming in and going out, orders placed with phone calls and fax messages, all "touched" by three or four employees. It was the perfect recipe for a mistake to be made.

Fortunately, by the early 1990s, as computers started to become more mainstream, all the information on the corkboard migrated onto a computer desktop, reducing the chance for error and allowing for more productivity with fewer people. Meanwhile, Nextel walkie-talkies also came into play, creating more instant and reliable communications between dispatch and driver. The last of the 1990s technological triumvirate was a breakthrough computer program called Global Ground Automation, which gave clients the ability to book airline flights and have the arrival and departure info automatically funneled to their ground transportation company. Heading into the new millennium, the technology that would drive our industry was off and running.

Today, besides what we've just discussed, there are many technological breakthroughs that should be standard features for every ground transportation company, particularly a start-up business.

1 WEBSITE

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FOREMOST WOULD BE a functional website. Back in the day, before the Internet exploded, limousine.com allowed businesses to book trips through its platform. Now any company can have an attractive website for little investment, maybe even as low as several thousand dollars to design and mount what is pretty much an electronic brochure for your company. Still, you need to think of your website as more than just an electronic picture album displaying shiny new cars. You must make it functional so clients can get a quote and book their reservations. Your website can then take it a step further by using reservation software that allows clients to track the progress of their reservations.

The top of the line, in my opinion, is Trip Tracker, which we use to access immediate travel information through FlightView, which relays FAA data on projected landing times, delays, and "wheels-down" status. The information is then routed from the dispatcher directly to a chauffeur's cell phone. And through the system's integrated mapping and GPS capabilities, all a dispatcher does is click on a trip and see where the driver has been for the last 30 minutes.

Another valuable feature of the Trip Tracker system is its Remote Concierge feature. By using a secure portal, we allow our clients, employees, drivers, affiliates and agents to book, track, and manage trips, review invoices, and print receipts once given permission via a user ID and password. And they can monitor their pickups, make changes, view the driver's status, their flight status, book future trips, even print out an invoice, all directly from their computer or hand-held device. Plus, Trip Tracker is able to integrate with QuickBooks, which makes accounting much easier.

The investment for Trip Tracker is about $5,000 per year. But we estimate that it saves us about $15,000 a year in costs we would associate with having additional staff hours used, driver down time, etc. So a three to one return on ROI is nothing to laugh about.

For companies with limited budgets or start-ups, there are less expensive alternatives, such as Limo Anywhere, a program that has many of the features of Trip Tracker, but lacks certain bells and whistles, such as the ability to integrate to QuickBooks or book a reservation through the Global Ground Automation network. But at $600 per year, it could be considered a good "start-up" program.

And while on the subject of websites, make sure you use it to not only attract customers but to reach out to them via e-blasts, blogs, etc.

2 GPS

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ANOTHER KEY TECHNOLOGICAL break-through has been the advent of GPS, which no limo company should be without. It should be as much a standard feature in any vehicle as a steering wheel and gas pedal. It's probably safe to say that as an industry, all of our data-bases are littered with the complaints of irate customers who either missed their flights because a chauffeur couldn't find the best/quickest route to an airport, or never got picked up at a hotel in the first place because a chauffeur ended up wandering off into another zip code. And many of those angry customers are now long gone.

But don't think of this GPS as the basic Garmin you buy in Wal-Mart for $200. The high-end ones you need to invest in also serve as a two-way communication device, and are able to automatically receive data and then transcribe that data into an easy-to-navigate map. It also serves as a tracking tool so you know at all times where your chauffeurs are. At a reasonable cost of about $600 each, the money you save each year just in gas receipts from drivers wandering the streets of the city looking for their pickup will more than pay for itself.

3 APPS

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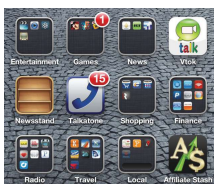
THERE IS NO SHORTAGE of new technology always popping up in our business. For instance, the sexy new bauble is a company app, which more and more limousine companies are investing in for a world living on its smartphone. It's not a big investment — maybe $200 — but I believe the jury is still out on whether it increases business or productivity as there's been very little hard data on its potential return on investment.

4 FILTERS

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YOU ALSO CAN USE the new technology designed to give your vehicles more bang for the buck. There are products out there such as the MicroGreen oil filter, which boasts being able to save companies up to 65% on oil maintenance costs. For only $7 a piece, it's worth looking into them even if the boast is only half true.

5 FACEBOOK

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AND OF COURSE everyone has Facebook because, well, everyone has Facebook. It's good to have a page to get the word out about yourself. But again, don't rely on it to put your company in the Fortune 500.

The technology is out there but it can be a pricey choice. Choose, but make sure you choose wisely. Shop around. Ask your affiliates what has worked for them. How has it saved them money? Did it help their business? For me, all I can offer is that, in the past five years, we have seen our company grow dramatically in revenue. And it's safe to say it wasn't done just by using push-pins. **LCT**

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