



# Improve the customer experience



This Irizar i4h hybrid coach was available for inspection outside the conference during the lunch period

## CoachMarque-accredited operators gathered to hear how they could further sharpen their act. Stuart Jones went to the Radisson Blu Hotel at East Midlands Airport to find out more

**The Chairman of CoachMarque, the CPT-backed standards organisation, warned that retaining quality staff is becoming difficult but essential.**

In his opening key address, Chris Owens, MD of Alpine Travel, referred to the difficulty that hotels were having recruiting and retaining quality staff since the Brexit vote and said it was the same for the coach industry. Despite the difficulties it was key to future success.

He handed over to Simon Smith, Coaching and Tourism Executive for CPT UK, the man who looks after the administration of CoachMarque, represented on the day by 50 members and a number of suppliers, for a conference which took as its theme 'Improving the Customer Experience - Driver Welfare and Luxury Travel'.

### The Ogden rate aftermath

The first speakers - the 'double act' of Phil White of Gallagher and Julian Cashen of Unicorn Underwriting - got a few giggles, telling the audience

that you always want to kick off a conference with an engaging and thought-provoking presentation, on a topic close to the heart of the attendees, and that they were



Chris Owens, Chairman of CoachMarque

going to be passionate about... but unfortunately Phil said he hadn't got one of those.

Looking at the insurance market, he said 99% of the industry was insured with one of ten insurers, illustrating their relative size with a slide. QBE was the biggest with gross written premiums of £40m (including 60% of coach business and 75% of bus business) but Unicorn, which sourced its money from Berkeley Hathaway, was growing rapidly from a standing start in April 2016 with £14.5m. There had been several changes of ownership among insurers and more were likely.

2017 had been a pivotal year in the insurance industry, especially motor insurance, because of a change to the Ogden rate or Discount rate from +2.5% (where it had been since 2001) to -0.75% made by the Government in February. It was, said Phil, the most boring thing on earth and at the same time the most exciting thing to happen to the insurance industry.

The rate is used by courts in personal injury cases when assessing

lump sum awards for claimants, and is based on what rate of return the claimant might expect to receive from a reasonably prudent investment of a compensation lump sum. The retrospective change meant that a claim previously costing £3m to settle now cost around £8m. Julian explained that this impacted on the cost to an underwriter of obtaining reinsurance. What had been 10% of a premium was now 20%. It was inevitable that rates would go up as a result.

Phil said that if you managed to obtain insurance at less than 20% more than last year you were doing well. To some extent the coaching industry was sheltered from the changes because it was well managed: many in haulage were seeing 50% rises. It was unfortunate because it was not something the industry had brought on itself.

Looking at cases of 'flash and crash for cash', when someone deliberately flashed a person to come out and then drove into them, he showed details of where the worst areas were. Top of the list was Birmingham where 25% of such claims originated. Whiplash claims cost the insurance industry £2.5bn annually, with whiplash claims up 60% despite accidents being reduced by a third. Phil detected a cultural shift within the judiciary towards the issue.

There were things operators could do to reduce the cost of their premiums. Among measures he advised were: starting the renewal process early; obtaining an individual insurer's claim listing; taking measures to reduce accident frequency; ensuring they reported incidents immediately; and a variety of risk management measures such as CCTV, in-vehicle telematics,



Phil White of Gallagher

issuing driver 'bump' cards, developing and employing proper post-accident procedures and carrying out licence and medical checks efficiently. On fitting in coach CCTV he said: "If all you've got is your driver's word against someone else's you are a sitting duck."

In conclusion Phil pointed out that Ogden also impacted on liability insurance, urging operators to check they still had adequate cover on any such policies, warning that if a claim exceeded the level of cover taken a company was likely to go bankrupt if a large claim was encountered.

### Global Passenger Network

Raquel Morcillo Esteban flew in from Spain to explain the Global Passenger Network and the benefits delegates should be deriving from CoachMarque membership of GPN.

GPN describes itself as: 'an international organisation with local services operated by premium bus and motor coach companies worldwide.' Members guarantee high standards of quality, safety and service and provide a wide variety of other services in addition to buses and coaches. Members need to have a minimum of five years experience, a modern fleet, sufficient vehicles, and be experts in all kinds of travel. Prospective partners are audited before being accepted.

GPN is currently represented in 38 countries and in most of these there is just one member operator. Some operators represent multiple countries. The exceptions are the USA and the UK where the member is an organisation of operators. Founded in 2006, CoachMarque joined GPN in 2008.

The benefits of belonging include immediate global relationships,



Raquel Morcillo Esteban of Esteban

increased clientele, emergency assistance abroad, international marketing and branding and privileged relationships with strategic alliance partners.

Among the ways GPN assists members to attract business are: web campaigns, coordinated trade show attendance, cross selling and an extensive web presence. Each operator has a presence on the GPN website which allows direct contact. The organisation's website currently generates around 7,000 enquiries annually of which 5% are for the UK, although the UK is the largest generator of leads for the network.

### The future of luxury coach travel

Richard Oxspring - now with Skills Coaches - explained the development of the Leger Travel Silver Service and Luxuria products which he was well equipped to address after many years with the company.

Believing there was no future in the standard touring product, Leger sought to move their brand up market by providing a better customer experience. The first Silver Service coaches were based on the 12-metre Mercedes-Benz Touro with 36 seats and a rear 'horseshoe' lounge but, following limited operator acceptance, Leger developed similar specifications with other manufacturers and gave operators the choice. Another element introduced was a very smart dress code for drivers with three-piece suits for driving and different resort uniforms.

For Luxuria, the stakes were raised again to provide only 31 seats arranged in a 2+1 pattern within a flat floored 14m VDL Futura FHD2. The high



Richard Oxspring



specification was inspired by the Emirates airline and includes video on demand because, he said, tour coach companies are not competing with Pontins and cheap airlines, they are competing with cruising holidays.

The first Luxuria was operated by Skills and, this year, six will be running; three with Skills, two with Hardings and one with Pat's Coaches. Incidentally, be careful googling Luxuria, as an Italian porn star has the same name (we were told!).

**Nutrition and driver safety**

Michelle Chester, an expert in nutritional therapy said that, according to ROSPA, driver fatigue may be a contributory factor in up to 20% of road accidents and up to a quarter of fatal and serious accidents.

She explored the causes of fatigue and what the barriers to being alert were for drivers. A major factor is poor eating habits and insufficient hydration, both of which make the blood thicken, reducing the flow and causing tiredness.

Running through nutritional factors she said it was a question of moderation and balance to maintain healthy blood sugar levels. Plenty of vegetables and fibre are required to avoid blood sugar imbalance. Refined carbohydrates and sugary foods such as white bread, white rice, pasta, potatoes, sweets and cakes are quickly broken down by the body.

Fibre is important because it makes it more difficult for the body to process the sugars, resulting in it taking longer and giving a slower rate of energy release. Caffeine and alcohol as well as skipping meals also cause an energy slump and tiredness. Eating very large, carbohydrate-rich meals was another cause of tiredness because it increases the amount of insulin produced by the body and, because insulin over-reacts, this causes tiredness later.

Delegates were asked to work with colleagues on their tables to come up with ideas about what could be done to promote better hydration and nutrition in the interest of reducing tiredness, better mental health, optimal function and preventing chronic diseases.

Ideas included posters in mess rooms, providing drivers with water, switching to decaffeinated tea and coffee in restrooms and on coaches, activity days, including nutrition in CPC training courses, banning the booty van, and having a company de-tox week. Michelle concluded:

"I hope nutrition becomes part of your employee awareness."

**Monkey, lion, elephant or dolphin?**

Nigel Risner was once the youngest ever CEO of a financial services company. He has since written a number of books and now makes his living entirely from motivational speaking. His company slogan is: 'turning limited people limitless.'

He began his interactive performance by urging those present, 'wherever you are, be there,' saying that, in 2018, he wanted everyone to be aware how often they were there, but not there because their mind was somewhere else.

He suggested that no meeting should be longer than 40 minutes, that the last item on an agenda should be 'any interesting business' rather than 'any other business' and, in keeping with his assertion that 'you can learn from the past but not change it' suggested we should invite feedforward rather than feedback.

Other suggestions were that every company represented should spend 21 days looking at the business without reference to the past year's performance and 'trust five minutes earlier' making the point that we often miss the chance to make a contact through a lack of trust.

By his classification, explained to the audience, Nigel is a self-confessed monkey (as, it appears, am I). Though energetic, he did not swing from the rafters, instead asking delegates to categorise themselves according to a list of characteristics within boxes on the screen. His point was monkeys, lions, elephants and dolphins can all be important members of a team but they need their traits to be recognised when you are trying to communicate with them. To manage all of these different animals you needed to be a zookeeper. He asked, 'are you being an effective zookeeper or do you go back to your animal type when under pressure?' (www.nigelrisner.com)

**Distinctive developments**

An optional but nevertheless well-attended presentation after the main sessions was made by Paul McJannett of Distinctive Systems who ran through changes made recently to the company's products in some detail as well as revealing a little of what it is working on for the future.

He looked at product enhancements, particularly the new portals within

Coach Manager and at the new Electronic Job Card within the Vehicle Management System (VMS). In Coach Manager, the online client portal now has: a solution for clients to request quotations and a quick quotation



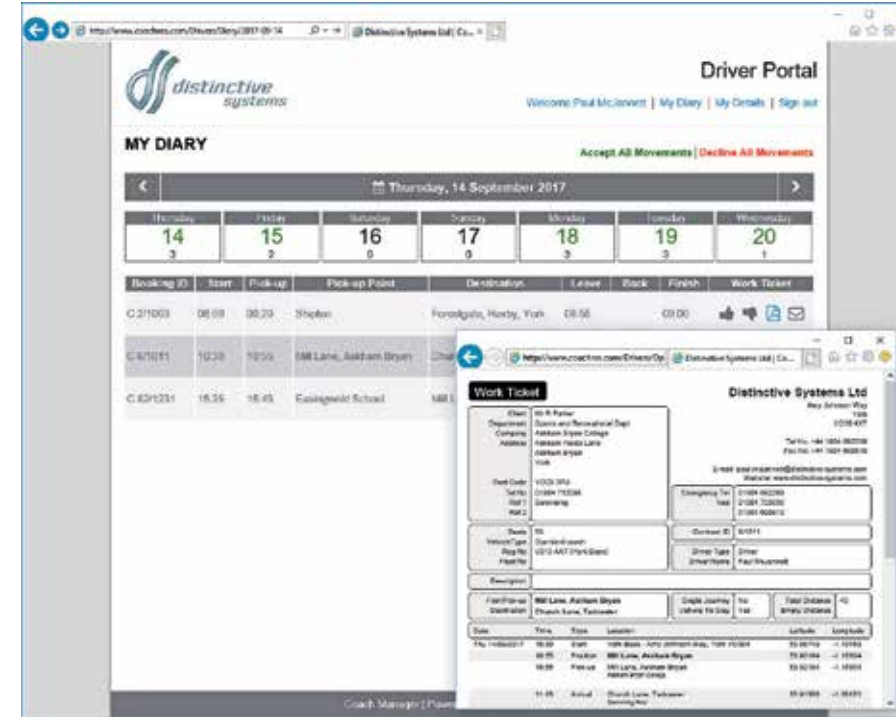
Michelle Chester



Nigel Risner



Paul McJannett of Distinctive Systems



Driver portal allows drivers to remotely see work tickets and booking details

widget; the ability to request the conversion of quotations to bookings; automatic update of the sales ledger for on-line payments; the ability to review all previous quotations, bookings and outstanding invoices; and data submitted directly into the Coach Manager database with users receiving pop-up notifications.

Released in November, the online driver portal provides: a solution for drivers to view their allocations securely; the ability for drivers to remotely view, print, download and email their work tickets with all actions recorded; control for the traffic office of work ticket availability to drivers; the option to allow drivers to accept and decline work; an automatic email function for informing drivers when work tickets are available or there are any booking changes; and real-time notifications in Coach Manager of work ticket status. Driver app enhancements are planned for the third quarter of the year.

The online operations portal is planned for release in the second quarter of this year. It will give: the traffic office the ability to view past and future allocations online; real time updates to vehicle and driver allocations; a large amount of back-office functions including colours coding for booking types, sorting and filtering of grids and vehicle/driver allocation checks; integration with VMS for defect and maintenance information; and the ability to push

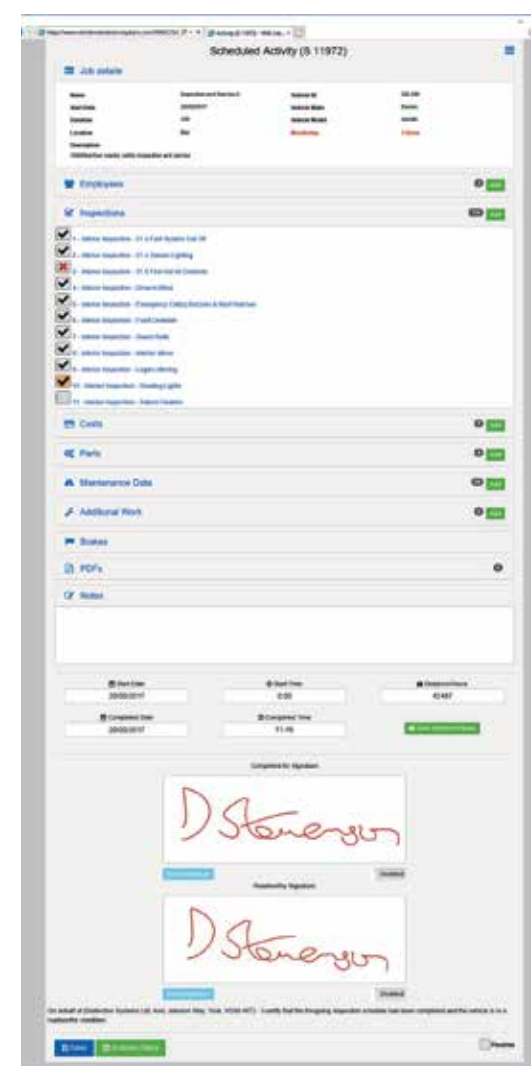


work tickets to a driver via the online driver portal.

The new portals, which are free to Coach Manager users as part of their monthly subscription, are fully integrated with and always show the same live data as Coach Manager, provide a single storage location for data entry and provide better 24/7 communication between all parties.

The VMS Electronic Job Card is a browser based replacement for a paper job card and requires an inexpensive tablet or laptop. It gives real time recording of: maintenance items and safety inspections (which can be marked as completed or monitoring); costs incurred; parts used (stock control only); brake test results; and additional work done. Digital signatures are provided to previous records including the activity diary, activity search by vehicle and activity search by activity ID.

The Tour Booking System has had website improvements including: a new template and better search availability; improved Google analytics; SMS texting for payment and pick-up reminders; discount codes; task and to-do lists with GDPR enhancements under development.



VMS job card can create a paperless workshop

Many questions were asked and the session was clearly beneficial all round; operators got answers to problems they encountered, congratulating Paul on what had been achieved in a short time and he got useful feedback on additional tweaks that could be made to further improve the usefulness of the products.

**Last word**

During an event which began with a dinner, various trade suppliers supported the event on conference day and had displays in the area where tea and coffee was taken. In addition, Irizar UK brought along the right-hand drive Irizar i4h hybrid demonstration coach which operators were able to take a closer look at during the lunch break.

Well supported and with plenty of content that could be utilised to assist in the well being of a coach business and its employees, this year's CoachMarque conference was both enjoyable and worthwhile. □