



Eyre Bus Service in Howard County is refocusing its business on tours, claiming to offer passengers a convenient alternative to flying.

(Sun photo by André F. Chung)

Buses get better

Motor coaches aim to persuade air travelers to go their way

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To those airline passengers who have seen flights delayed or canceled, had their bags lost or stood in endless security lines, Peter J. Pantuso says: Take the bus.

The president of the American Bus Association is serious.

Private commuter, charter and interstate buses carry hundreds of millions of people a year, and industry members believe that there are enough disgruntled plane and train passengers and even drivers to significantly increase the number. They have launched an effort to nab others' business

and, they hope, improve the bus' reputation.

"Anything we can do to move the dial will be valuable, not just for the industry but for consumers and even the environment because a bus that carries 55 people gets 55 cars off the road," Pantuso said.

"But this isn't just about raising the number, it's about making people aware of what buses can do.

"Part of the challenge in the past has been lack of awareness," Pantuso said.



Ron Eyre (center), president, runs the 60-year-old family-owned Howard County charter bus and travel company with his sons Matthew (left) and Kevin.

(Sun photo by André F. Chung)



Eyre, one of the larger bus companies in the area, has 40 modern motor coaches with airplane-style seats, DVD players and picture windows. It offers frequent service to Atlantic City and New York.
(Sun photo by André F. Chung)

The association is in the initial throes of a get-on-the-bus campaign that emphasizes ease, convenience and service for business and leisure travelers.

The group won't launch an expensive national campaign but will help its bus company members sound a consistent and more prominent message with their local radio, newspaper and television ads.

There are no numbers yet to show whether it is working because it is so new. But it is already clear that changing minds won't be easy. And that is despite all the tales of passengers being stranded for hours on runways and statistics showing that the airlines lost more luggage, delayed more flights and bumped more passengers last year than in the year before.

"From business traveler perspective, there are some marketing challenges, some image challenges, that would have to be overcome," said Kevin Mitchell, head of the Business Travel Coalition, a group that represents corporate travel managers.

"All bus stations are dirty and smelly, and the buses are all old. All the terminals are likely to be in inconvenient locations. And goodness only knows who you're going to be

sitting next to. Was last month the last time he showered? And that's just for openers," he said.

Furthermore, said Mitchell, if you're visiting a client, he may not be impressed that you showed up in a bus. And there are safety and security concerns with putting your workers on the same vehicle on the road.

All that said, it could save money and maybe time.

Mitchell suggested that the industry drop the word "bus" and go for "shuttle" or something like that.

Actually, the industry prefers "motor coach."

David Castelvetter, spokesman for the Air Transport Association, the major trade group for U.S. airlines, agreed there is a place for the bus. But he'll stick with airplanes.

"Despite the hassles associated with security, flying is still the most convenient and safest way to travel," he said. "More people are flying now than ever, and they're choosing to fly for a reason."

Last year, the association said, about 744.5 million people boarded a plane in the United States. Bus boardings for 2006 aren't yet available, but in 2005,

there were 631 million, up from 605 million in 2004, the first time a complete census was taken. The numbers include all private buses and not public city buses.

And while several people at Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport said recently that they have or would take a bus, those like Josh Sullivan, a tourist from Florida, said nothing could get him on board one.

"The bus takes too long," he said. "If it gets to the point where I wouldn't fly, I'd drive. If I have to be stuck in a vehicle, I may as well be stuck in my own."

The bus people and their supporters are undeterred.

Delos Smith, an economist who lives in New York, is a regular on Greyhound to Baltimore and Washington. He says the trip is cheap and he works while riding.

He's been a bus loyalist for almost six decades, since he took his first trip from New York to Wyoming, and believes that people who are in too big a hurry to take the bus are missing out.

"If you want to learn about culture or transportation infrastructure, you can't see it from 40,000 feet," he said. "I understand buses have something of an image problem, and a lot of it stems from the Greyhound bus. But they're changing. The bus world is repairing its image, and soon

others will see what I see."

Ron Eyre is depending on that. He and his sons run the 60-year-old Howard County family charter bus and travel company.

He said the answer is service: Treat customers well. Provide a clean and comfortable ride, with trained and courteous drivers. Go places people want to go, such as **Atlantic City**, New York and the Greenbrier resort in West Virginia.

The Eyres have 40 modern motor coaches with airplane-style seats, DVD players and big, picture windows. They transport school sports teams to games, charity groups on missions, friends to see Broadway plays, commuters to work and business people on retreats.

The company's revenue is up 12 percent this year, which Eyre - pronounced "air" - attributes to word of mouth and new services such as its Eyreliner. That bus takes passengers to

New York for eight hours for \$59.

That's enough time to sightsee, have dinner and take in a show. They'll even get you tickets.

"I think the motor coach industry provides a nice product," Eyre said, adding that a new motor coach with all the amenities costs \$425,000, and there's no uncomfortable middle seat.

But for most people, it's the Greyhound that comes to mind when someone says "bus." And customer surveys by that company revealed problems officials there had suspected.

About a third of Greyhound passengers make more than \$35,000 annually. Almost half have used an airline in the past year. About 30 percent of riders have a college degree and a reliable car. Overall, they thought bus rides were too long and made too many stops. And worse: "They also weren't enjoying their time with us," said Anna Folmsbee, a spokeswoman for Greyhound.

She said the bus company launched a program two years ago called "Elevate Everything." Routes were improved and, most importantly, buses and terminals were cleaned. All improvements are supposed to be done in time for the Thanksgiving rush this year.

Annual ridership on Greyhound dropped from about 25 million in 2000 to 19 million last year (in part, because of closing 1,000 underused stations.) But Folmsbee said the changes should help turn the tide. So should the company's new frequent-traveler program and special Internet fares.

"The industry can't improve its image unless it improves its product," she said. "We hope people get the message. Now you can enjoy your trip."

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