



GET FIT

Or get left behind. That's the message from today's motorcoach travelers. Here's how tour planners are responding.

BY JAMES TABOR

Options, options, and more options. Motorcoach tours today are increasingly all about choice, and a rainbow of ever more customer-friendly tours are one of the industry's most robust growth segments. One-fourth of members of the U.S. Tour Operators Association say Flexible Itinerary Tours (FITs) are their largest growth area, according to a recent member survey.

Today tour operators must “think outside the box when designing tour services and tailor their services to match the needs of the market,” concludes the ABA-commissioned study “Baby Boomers and Future Seniors: How to Get Them on Motorcoaches?” (For more on this report, see the sidebar on page 29.)

Tour operators of all sizes get the message and are responding. In this article, we look at how three very different ABA member companies—international motorcoach operator Globus, Butler Motor Transit of Butler, Pa., and receptive operator Custom Tours of Montpelier, Vt.—have taken action to keep travelers happy and grow their businesses.

Traveling the Globus

Industry giant Globus Family Brands has 85 years of experience creating and running tours domestically and worldwide. “We have experienced considerable growth in the desire for custom travel experiences from our loyal agent and group leader community,” says Stephanie Parr-Brooks, its director of contracting. “Travelers are seeking unique experiences and some degree of flexibility when it comes to determining their actual itineraries. Just as independent travel has grown, there’s also been strong demand for customized group experiences for people who share common interests, affinities, or friendships.”

It’s part of a larger consumer trend toward the customization of all manner of products and services, according to Parr-Brooks. The trend to customize and “not buy something off of the shelf” has gained strength in recent years and manifested itself in all kinds of consumer products. For example, Ralph Lauren offers custom-made, monogrammed shoes. Make-your-own-dessert yogurt shops are all the rage. A new mobile app, NetPlenish’s ShopGenius, provides the last word in customization—price. Consumers submit a shopping list, and retailers bid against each other to provide the best price, including tax and shipping.

So popular has the customized tour become that the United States Tour Operators Association has a special name for it—the “E Factor” (the E stands for experiential). The association claims that customers’ desire for personal attention is one of the top reasons behind travelers’ decision-making processes.

Creating custom tours requires the coordination of multiple travel-planning factors, a higher level of teamwork, and

more creativity than was typical in the past. “It is a challenging process to customize programs,” says Parr-Brooks. “Over the course of the last several years we have assembled a dedicated team of professionals who focus on the creation and delivery of the best possible custom tour programs for each client.” Globus’ Custom Tour Team members must understand tour logistics, air requirements, and contracting tour components and have very solid destination knowledge.

Successfully operating one type of custom tour is no guarantee that an operator has gained mastery over this complex genre. “There is not one particular type of custom tour,” says Parr-Brooks. “We work with each client to determine the specific needs of the group. The trick is to understand what their goal is for their trip. The result may be something as simple as tailoring an existing tour from our existing brochure portfolio to include extra nights or more meals or perhaps offering additional excursions.” Then again, she says the client’s “directive might also be to create something

OPERATORS
MUST BE NIMBLE
AND ALERT.



Locations from the Bond, Bourne, and Beyond tour

HAVING A WIDE VARIETY OF TOURS HELPS PLEASE CLIENTS.

completely new, perhaps based on a theme or a special interest."

In response to clients' demands (as well as to serve emerging market opportunities), Globus has created U.S. and international tours focusing on an incredible array of interests—gardens, history, architecture, food and wine, quilting, and farming. For example, in response to a market opportunity, it put together "Bond, Bourne, and Beyond," an 11-day tour to Italy, France, and Switzerland that visited spots where scenes from James Bond and Jason Bourne thriller films were shot, as well as locations from *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* productions. The lesson? In today's market, operators must be as nimble and as alert as a secret agent spying out new opportunities.

Butler Means Customer Service

Novelty doesn't necessarily mean exotic locales. It's important not to lose sight of what's close to home. Pennsylvania's Butler Motor Transit, a family-managed Coach USA company with 70 motorcoaches, has specialized in Keystone State tours and charter services for 73 years. Tour Manager Tracy Chiprean stresses the importance of staying sharp and on the cutting edge. "We have worked very hard to continue offering fresh and new tour packages and destinations for our passengers to choose from," she says. "These include the newest vacation spots and attractions, as well as current entertainment and existing developed vacation areas."

For example, Chiprean put together a 2013 motorcoach tour organized around the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. More specifically, it featured a new "Steam into History" train whose premiere journey coincided with the

event. "Although everyone does Gettysburg, the train was brand new and sparked a huge amount of interest for this year's Gettysburg trips."

When it comes to tours, Butler has found a world of customized opportunities close to home. "Some of the best entertainment in the country is right in our home state of Pennsylvania and city of Lancaster," Chiprean says. She stays abreast of all the newest plays at theaters in and around Lancaster "right up to the last minute." The latest offerings are then bundled into "Entertainment Packages" that include several shows in one trip. "These packages are very popular among our travelers and, for the most part, do not require a lot of walking, which makes them an attractive choice for our senior market," she adds.

Having a wide variety of existing tours helps please clients, and being eager to adapt to their requests is just as important or more so. "We had one private group pick two different tour packages from our brochure and ask us if we could hook them together," Chiprean says. Needless to say, Butler was happy to do so.

"In recent years, we have also become sensitive to smaller groups joining our

What Do Boomers Want?

"A flexible schedule with available free time and relaxation time [is] an important determinant" in choosing a tour, according to the ABA-commissioned study "Baby Boomers And Future Seniors: How to Get Them on Motorcoaches?"

The conclusion by the report's author, James Petrick, a professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M, is blunt: "A tour which delighted baby boomers in the past may be seen as inappropriate to today's travelers in the same age bracket....Tour operators should understand what baby boomers want, provide them with innovative and exclusive services, and enhance the quality of services throughout the whole journey."

What's more, "today's seniors are more individualistic, prefer more freedom on their journeys, do not like to travel with large groups and perceive themselves to be younger than their real ages," says Petrick.

For a copy of the report, visit www.buses.org/ABA-Foundation/Research.

Gettysburg area sights

public tours," Chiprean says. "In some instances, we've made special pickups to accommodate them as needed."

Since many private groups and clubs may not have enough people to fill their own coaches, Butler Tours is pleased to accommodate them and generate priceless word-of-mouth advertising. "We might have 20 people from a local church all join an existing Lancaster tour, and we would gladly pick them up at their church in town, if that's what they wanted. We try to do this whenever possible to create great public relations among group members and build return business. Small groups can bring us great bulk business to help fill bus seats."

The Custom Tours, Inc., Solution

Custom Tours, Inc., does what its name says: It offers custom tours and only custom tours. Headquartered in Montpelier, Vt., this receptive operator was founded in 1994 by its president, Linda Edelman, and its territory includes the northeast U.S. and eastern Canada. "Travelers are much more savvy now," she says. "With access to the Internet, tour operators are researching hotels, restaurants, attractions, and more before calling me."

But even the Internet can only take clients so far. Edelman says that "'experience' is the key word now. Clients are looking

for that hidden treasure they can't find on their own. For example, she says her travelers no longer want to just learn about tapping maple trees in Vermont. They want to get out into the woods and do the tapping themselves." Not every flinty New England maple-sugar maker would welcome a busload of enthusiasts wandering around his property, but Edelman has made that happen, thanks to her network of contacts, years in the making, that includes maple-sugar makers throughout the region.

Her protocol is to get as many details as possible when organizing custom tours. "I ask lots of questions about tour length, group size, age, demographics, special interests, and other defining characteristics," she says. "Then I start discussing options for attractions, lodging, dining, and so forth."

Here's a typical recent custom-tour planning experience at her company: A

CVBs Get FIT

Operators aren't the only ones responding to requests for custom tours. Convention and visitors' bureaus are meeting the challenge, too. Sarah Hamlin, vice president of the Greater Birmingham Convention and Visitors Bureau, says, "We're creative in how we present new itineraries that appeal to a diverse audience. Some groups want an experiential tour that immerses them into our community's culture. We can let them choose from a variety of bus tour options including jazz in the park, dinner in an urban garden, and wine tasting in a vineyard."

group leader called from California wanting to fly his group to Boston for a seven-day Cape Cod tour that included lodging, restaurants, attractions, and local guides. But there was a catch. There would actually be two separate groups, and they would require different motorcoaches and have different itineraries. One group was more interested in beaches, sand dunes, natural history, and wildlife. The other wanted to explore the Cape's towns, shops, and attractions. So Edelman further customized an already customized tour to fit her client's needs, bringing both groups together, with the help of ABA member Art's Dune Tours, for a final classic New England lobster bake on the beach at night.

Like Butler Tours, Edelman takes full advantage of travel treasures hidden close to home, and when she does, she locks in her hometown advantage. The acclaimed New England Culinary Institute is also in Montpelier, where she's based. Recognizing its potential, the savvy Edelman forged an exclusive motorcoach tour agreement with the institute that allows her groups to spend time in its kitchens baking and preparing meals with chefs.

Being a small company actually gives Custom Tours advantages over its bigger competitors. While reluctant to reveal her trade secrets, Edelman loves the personal touch. "I give fresh-baked cookies and other treats to every coach tour," she says. That's the kind of sweet attention to details travelers will remember. ■

James Tabor has written for *Forbes*, *Barrons*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

NOVELTY DOESN'T NECESSARILY MEAN EXOTIC LOCALES.

Timeless Cape Cod

