

THE CELEBRITY BUS DRIVERS ACADEMY

Expanding Resources and Opportunities for Tomorrow's Tours

by KIP KIRBY

Fresh-cut flowers...chilled champagne in the fridge...turndown service with mints on the pillow...

If this sounds like room service in a five-star boutique hotel, think again. It's just another day at home — when your home has wheels, a 200-gallon fuel tank and an oversized steering wheel. And for entertainers who spend much of their lives on the road, it's service as usual, provided by the person who pilots them along highways and back roads.

But what does it take to be a celebrity bus driver? How do you get hired to drive for the Taylor Swifts, Carrie Underwoods and Keith Urbans of the world? Achieving these goals may have just become easier, thanks to The Celebrity Bus Drivers Academy, co-founded by Chip Huffman and Tandy Rice, President of the sales and marketing company and booking agency Top Billing.

"This type of training school has never been attempted," said Huffman, Founder and former President of Nitetrain Coach Company. "We think the timing is great because Nashville is becoming such an entertainment hub. Approximately 80 percent of the buses that move entertainers — I'm talking about every genre of music — are based in Nashville or in close proximity. Also, a lot of veteran drivers who have served the industry so well for so many years are getting close to retirement age, and we want to be part of helping the next generation enter the business."

From throughout the United States and Canada, 15 certified professional drivers came to the headquarters of Prevost, the well-known coach manufacturer, in Goodlettsville, near Nashville, to attend the Academy's opening in June. Each met a specific set of criteria before being accepted. Each also had a sense of commitment — and \$1,000 for enrollment.

"It's always been my dream to drive an entertainer's coach," said Brian Greenlee of Victorville, Calif. "When I had my first bus, I really enjoyed keeping up the coach and keeping the people on it happy. I've raised my family now, and my wife and I have a strong enough relationship that I could be on the road and work with entertainers."

"I've driven everything under the sun except for one of these buses," said Crystal Schewire of Long Island, N.Y., the only female attendee. "I have been sending in my résumés for the last three years, but I never got an interview for a driver job. All of a sudden this came up and I said, 'This is perfect. It's a thousand dollars. I'm gonna do it.'"

Over the next three days, the drivers listened and learned from experts that included artist and tour managers, veteran celebrity drivers and representatives of various entertainment coach and trucking companies. Sessions were designed to provide insights into the industry as well as hands-on experience. "How Do You Become a Professional Driver?," "Who Rides on the Bus? Why So Many People?," "What Do You Look for When Hiring a Driver?" and "Paperwork: What's Expected" were among the workshops in the curriculum. One session let participants train on a Prevost coach converted with equipment that might be found on a typical celebrity bus.

The amount and quality of information impressed even those enrollees who had experience as celebrity drivers. "I came for networking and skills upgrading," said Ron Doucette of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, whose résumé already includes driving for Gordon Lightfoot and other artists. "This is the only school of its kind, so I couldn't stay away. I plan to take the information and skills I learn back to my customers and offer a higher, better level of service than anyone else in Canada."

Non-students, including expert panelists and observers from the tour bus industry, held similarly positive impressions. "A bus driver for an entertainer is like a landlord," said Jeff Davis, who has produced and managed tours for Randy Travis and served as well as a part-time relief



Students from
The Celebrity Bus
Drivers Academy's
inaugural session.



Chip Huffman and Tandy Rice

driver for the artist. "There's a whole lot more involved than just sitting in the seat and driving from Point A to Point B. You have to operate and maintain all the systems onboard, from the plumbing to the satellite TV to the Internet to the air conditioning. I think the Academy is going to give drivers a chance to learn what they need to know before they actually get out there and have to learn on the job."

Even so, completion of this course by no means guarantees employment. "There are three or four thousand drivers and a thousand coaches in this industry," said Neville Shende, Driver Relations and Safety Manager for Pioneer Coach and author of "The Entertainment Coach Driver: An Inside Look." "It's 1 percent of 1 percent of the professional driving industry. It's majorly competitive, so these companies are going to hire only the best."

Huffman and Rice believe they have this covered. Once drivers graduate from the Academy's core training, they can file with its Top Billing Driver Placement Service. It's a two-tiered operation, designed to give applicant drivers the roadworthiness they need to score a full-time position.

"The first phase is our apprentice program," said Huffman. "Graduates of the Academy will be available to double-drive with veteran drivers that are in excess of DOT/HOS (Department of Transportation/Hours of Service) rules. They will be paid like a normal driver but at a slightly reduced rate to reflect their apprentice status until they get enough experience to step up to a full-time category."

Once drivers accumulate enough experience, Top Billing will try to place them with one of many coach companies. Drivers who get placements through Top Billing will pay a percentage of their earnings to the agency, similar to the process at temporary staffing agencies.

"I've spent the last several months in contact with most all the bus companies, not just in Nashville but the ones located in outlying areas," said Huffman. "I've not only been in e-mail and phone contact with them, but I've visited personally to tell them what we're doing, how we're doing it and why we're doing it. The majority have bought in, absolutely."

As for Rice, while acknowledging that his longtime high profile in the music industry contributes to establishing the Academy's profile, he intends to actively apply his promotional and marketing skills to further its success.

"The story here isn't so much what we've done but the fact that we've *done it*," he insisted. "Hey, in today's economy, when people have their backs up against the wall, they get real courageous and real ingenious. A lot of drivers are coming to us from big-rig truck driving and they're just worn out. They're beat up from all the hauling and loading and unloading freight. Most of them are mature gentlemen; they've been there, done that. Our job, as far as I'm concerned, is, instead of looking for a nightclub to book an artist to sing, we're looking for a bus to book a driver to drive."

The next Celebrity Bus Drivers Academy session is slated for November.

Huffman-Rice.com

Essential Advice for Celebrity Bus Drivers

Based on his experience with clients including Lynyrd Skynyrd, Reba McEntire, Bret Michaels, LeAnn Rimes and Dwight Yoakam, celebrity coach driver Eric Smith lists the skills he considers indispensable for completing tours successfully.

Provide Five-Star Service. "Just like at fine hotels, you are the 'face at the front desk.' Be the concierge if needed. Look up local restaurants and activities. Do a weather check. Stock the refrigerator. You're also the maid, making beds, cleaning toilets and taking out endless amounts of garbage. Do it with a smile. Don't ever make clients feel they're imposing on you."

Be Confident and Likable. "Trust in yourself and your skills, but don't seem arrogant or overly confident."

Be "Vanilla." "Study your clients and find out how to best fit in with their personalities. Be a chameleon. Learn to be whatever the job requires you to be."

Be Invisible. "The group or celebrity you're hauling probably needs 99.9 percent of the bus. No matter how much they tell you they love you and you're the best, this means 'Driver, go away!' Staying out of their way will win you points."

Make Everyone Feel Safe. "Get the clients where they're going without them realizing they ever moved. You want a reputation as a smooth driver. Do this and you'll get asked back again and again."

Park Closest to the Venue. "This only works if you're the headliner, of course. If you're the opening act, be prepared to move your bus quickly if asked."

Be a Mechanical Genius. "Learn your equipment and how to operate every single device on the bus. Spend the day before you leave exploring the bus, organizing it, test-driving it and cleaning every square inch. Read the manuals or talk with a mechanic. Assume the worst: The satellite *will* go down. Be prepared so you don't end up trying to fix things on the side of the road with the artist breathing down your neck."

Adjust to Sleep Deprivation. "Sleep while everyone else is up and at the show. Don't be tempted to hang out at the venue for fun. Get to the hotel — and *sleep*."

Deal with Time Alone and Far from Home. "A driver's schedule can ruin relationships because tours can keep you away for a long time. If possible, choose clients you feel you can spend months on the road with and still like each other at the end."