

EPSOM COACHES

Epsom's Distinctive success

CBW's Gareth Evans visits Epsom Coaches and learns about how the operator has used Distinctive Systems' software to gain some remarkably positive results

"I think we were one of the first operators to have on-line booking," said Alistair Scott, marketing manager at Epsom Coaches as we got chatting over a nice cup of coffee about the firm's use of Distinctive Systems' technology. "Since its introduction some eighteen months ago, I believe it's developed very well. We have only really been promoting it for the day excursion market and we've now got 25% of our customers booking on-line."

I can't help but congratulate Epsom on achieving such a remarkable figure.

"A lot of operators think many of their customers are too old to use the internet. However, there's a whole generation where computers and the internet have been part of their daily lives and are now approaching retirement."

Again, I find myself agreeing with Alistair. Having reached their mid- to late-fifties, my parents went on their first coach holiday a couple of months ago. In recent years they've seen various parts of Europe by train, but dad said he was fed up with lugging suitcases across London and that the almost door-to-door service offered by a coach seemed an attractive proposition. Being a teacher, he's a prime example of the kind of person Alistair talked about. Indeed, it may therefore come as little surprise that my parents booked their holiday on-line with an operator who uses a Distinctive Systems programme. I remember them telling me how easy it was and indeed, they've now got their eyes set on another coach break later this year.

Explaining the reason behind the roll-out of web-booking for day tours only at first, Alistair said: "We didn't go straight into holidays on-line because the ability

for customers to select their seats did not exist initially, but it has since been developed."

"Our winter programme is about to come out. On-line booking will attract a £20 discount. The thing to remember is that the client doesn't necessarily have to do it themselves - they can get someone else to do it for them, like sons or daughters."

Back to the day excursions, Alistair said: "We have achieved 25% with only our second day excursion programme. If it got to the stage where two-thirds of bookings came via the internet, we might take the view that it would not be worth while producing paper brochures. This is one of the reasons we have gone



for the whole package."

"The coach industry as a whole underestimates the impact of the world wide web. Some sites don't have a news section. Your website should be frequently updated - you need to shout about your achievements. It inspires confidence. It's human nature to be attracted to something successful."

On the coach hire side Alistair said that customers can get a quote almost instantly. They fill in the details themselves, which saves both parties being stuck on the phone. It's also there in black and white in case mistakes are



Above: Epsom operates a fleet of Setra coaches. Left: A screen shot of Epsom Coaches' professional-looking and easy to use website. Right: Office staff pose for the camera!

AT A GLANCE

OPERATOR:
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1920
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made. "Customers think it's great that you can e-mail them straight back with a quote," he said.

"I sometimes think we're very insular in this industry. We need an outside the box approach. It speaks for itself that we've attracted so many bookings on-line. The discount is about 10% in reality. We prefer to use monetary value rather than think in percentage terms, because people tend to think they're being conned and don't trust it. Perhaps it's because politicians so often tout that kind of thing - people become very cynical of them," continued Alistair.

Why should an operator invest in Distinctive Systems, I ask.

"We don't open Saturdays, so the fact that our telephones are not manned outside the standard Monday to Friday office hours doesn't mean customers are unable to access what we have to offer," replied Alistair. "The beauty of the internet is that it allows people to access services at a time that is convenient to them - you'd be surprised

at the number of bookings we have at midnight. I could think of better things to do personally!" joked Alistair.

"Even in the early days you won't lose staff because you've rolled out on-line booking as you can use them in different ways, be it promoting your business or exploring new areas."

Andrew Richmond, managing director said: "We developed our own system in partnership with another company in the 1980s. It was very expensive at the time. Gradually the costly old main frame computers gave way to PCs and we eventually abandoned the system and went with the flow with Distinctive Systems. We ran our own system up until 1993-94, for about ten or so years."

"You'd think there would be an age problem but the reality is older people have more time to surf the web," smiled Andrew.

"A few years ago our average overhead per booking was £8. Day tours are small in value and hence the overheads can eat into your profit margin, whereas with holidays it's a different matter. Our theory is that on-line booking makes day tours economical whereas some operators have dropped them."

Vehicle Management System

I then met Ian Norman, fleet care manager to discuss the Vehicle Management System (VMS). Ian has entered this industry from "the real

world" as he put it - the automotive industry. "Compared to retail, this is a totally different market. I mean, if you merely look at the volume of vehicles sold - look at all the Ford Focuses on the road."

Ian explained how VMS interfaces with Coach Manager. "If we book a particular coach for inspection for a given day on VMS, it flags up on Coach Manager as unavailable."

"What features has it got?" I ask Ian enthusiastically.

"It covers maintenance in the respect that you can log defects and nil-defects," replied Ian. "Importantly, it needs an input to clear a defect so we've got a full auditable defect report to present to VOSA if required. I should say that the system is VOSA approved."

"It will also schedule routine inspections for you. It also does all our parts management, which is the clever part to it. Like most stock programmes, it will flag up if stock falls outside pre-set parameters but cleverly it will also look to the future. If for example,

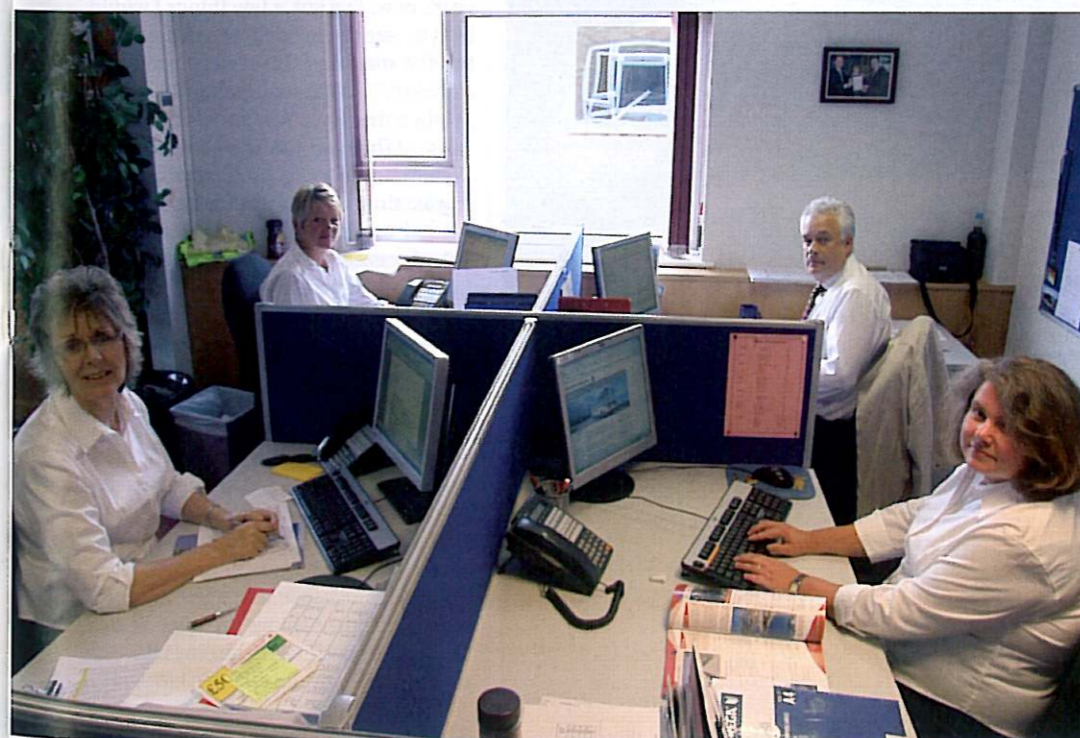
WE'VE NOW GOT 25% OF OUR CUSTOMERS BOOKING DAY TOURS ON-LINE

you've got three services coming up, it will look at the stock levels and if you've not got them, it will add them to the order lists."

"The reporting side is good too - you can design more or less anything you want. You can pick and choose what you want it to tell you, again using parameters. It takes a lot of setting up and needs to be maintained and hence we don't use some of the features on the grounds of man hours involved. I can also monitor my accident and incident reports on there, including pictures. The system also allows you to keep a record of outside contract work and invoice third parties for that work. However, we concentrate on maintaining our own vehicle so we don't use it but it's there if we ever need it."

"Is it easy to use?" I ask.

"For what we use it for it's a good system," replied Ian. "On the whole it does what it says on the tin. Overall, I've only used this system in this industry, so have nothing to compare



Operator Profile

EPSOM COACHES

it with. Like anything, it's not infallible but nine times out of ten it does what it should do for us. However, it's clear that Distinctive Systems look at the bus and coach industry as a whole and then designed parts and got them to integrate. So if you want an overall business system then this is the one to go for."

Coach Manager and Tour Booking System (TBS)

"I've used both Coach Manager and Tour Booking System (TBS)," said Melanie Mackie, office manager.

"I really like it but I guess I'm biased as I've never used any other system. I find it really simple to use and it does the job it's required to do.

"Are there any features that you think are particularly good?" I ask.

"I like the scheduling screen as it gives an overall picture at a glance,"

THE INTERNET
ALLOWS PEOPLE TO
ACCESS SERVICES
AT A TIME THAT IS
CONVENIENT TO
THEM

replied Melanie.

"Different colours refer to different types of work, while the initials on a particular line of work are those of the driver. Another useful feature is that you can go to a driver log, which is particularly useful when you get a request for a particular driver. If s/he is on holiday for example, you can't allocate them to that job. You can also keep digital copies of their licence and I find it very user friendly. It will also print off work tickets, letters and invoices - it's all very easy.

"It also shows you what the vehicles' allocation status is. For example, if a coach is booked in for an inspection in the workshop, it won't allow you to allocate it.

"It's also good because I work on the holiday side. When I input a holiday, it allocates a coach to a particular holiday, which saves time inputting it again.

"When we first had TBS, it didn't interface with Coach Manager but it does, all done in one go, thereby avoiding duplication and the risk of errors entering the system."

At this point, I can't help recalling



USEFUL CONTACTS

Distinctive Systems 01904 692269
<http://www.distinctive-systems.com>

an IT lecturer from university who was forever mentioning the words "redundant data" in his best Geordie accent, while teaching us about databases. Thankfully I think the Epsom people understand my quirky sense of humour.

Back to Distinctive Systems, I ask Melanie whether they have been supportive.

"I've been up for a two-day course and they're coming here next month to train four of our staff," she replied.

"If there are any bugs, they'll fix it as

a general release," added Alistair.

"I've been using it for just over five years now. I've got a few things I would like to see developed in due course, but the majority of it is very good and accurate," concluded Melanie.

I then met Gaye Wilson, who works in sales: "When we first had the booking system there were so many features it was almost scary but it's now such a good tool and makes life far easier. Take for example taxi bookings."

"It works out a route and produces a map," added Alistair.

"Yes it's been working very well," agreed Gaye.

"We get outside taxi companies to do the work but they seem to be very happy with what the system produces, which I suppose speaks for itself," Alistair continued.

"You need to get a postcode off the customer, but most people know theirs these days because you need them for so many other things in life," added Gaye. "It's an efficient system I have to say."

Turning to the reports, Alistair said: "It's very useful for things like the tour

performance report, which enables us to see if a given tour is financially viable."

"We estimate the costs for tours and then input the actual when the tour comes back," added Gaye. "While we don't cancel too many, it helps us to decide whether or not a particular tour should go ahead."

John Fowler, coach services manager, said, "It's a one-size fits all management tool. Our newer customers are constantly surprised by the e-mail confirmation and the fact that they receive invoices by e-mail. From our point of view it's more efficient and saves time and resources."

Conclusion

Having had the three main elements of the system demonstrated to me in an everyday working environment, I found it hard not to be impressed.

Epsom's experience and thoughts on the issue of on-line booking were also interesting. Twenty-five percent represents a huge shift to my mind and indeed shows the potential for others to learn.

Modern workshop facilities (above); A new addition to the fleet for 2008 is a Plaxton Cheetah (left); A line-up of Setra coaches outside the firm's clean and tidy premises (below)



DISTINCTIVE SYSTEMS PROGRAMMES OVERVIEW

Epsom Coaches uses all three programmes available from Distinctive Systems, including Coach Manager, Tour Booking System and Vehicle Maintenance System, which all interface with each other.

COACH MANAGER

The Coach Manager Private Hire and Contract Booking System has been specially designed for coach, minibus and chauffeur companies. The system produces client confirmation letters, driver work tickets and invoices for either individual or multiple bookings. The built in sales ledger can produce client statements, an aged debt analysis and a wide range of financial reports. The graphical scheduling system makes it easy to achieve the most efficient possible utilisation of both vehicles and drivers.

Private Hire & Contract Booking System

The Coach Manager Private Hire and Contract Booking System has been specially designed for coach, minibus and chauffeur companies. The system produces client confirmation letters, driver work tickets and invoices for either individual or multiple bookings. The built in sales ledger can produce

client statements, an aged debt analysis and a wide range of financial reports. The graphical scheduling system makes it easy to achieve the most efficient possible utilisation of both vehicles and drivers.

Quotation and Pricing System

The Coach Manager Quotation and Pricing System, included as standard with the main booking system, combines a sophisticated but easy to use price calculator with a quotation management system designed for the rapid input, storage and retrieval of private hire quotations.

Community Transport System

The Coach Manager community transport system, also included as standard with the main booking system, adds a collection of additional features developed to meet the specialised needs of community transport operators.

Web Pack

The optional Coach Manager Web Pack allows an operator's staff and clients to access selected features of the Coach Manager booking system

TOUR BOOKING SYSTEM (TBS)

The Distinctive Systems Tour Booking System is a complete management

solution for individual passenger reservations on extended tours, day excursions and express services. In addition to handling bookings made in person or by telephone, the system provides operators with a fully automated data driven website capable of handling online bookings from both agents and direct clients.

VEHICLE MAINTENANCE SYSTEM (VMS)

The Distinctive Systems Vehicle Maintenance System is a computer based workshop management package specially designed for PSV and HGV operators. It provides a complete start to finish solution covering all aspects of defect and nil defect reporting, inspection planning, scheduled and unscheduled maintenance activity management, history recording and workshop control.

The optional Vehicle Maintenance System Additional Modules, which include stock control, invoicing, sales ledger and purchase order processing, make the system an ideal solution for operators who provide a commercial workshop service.