

Don't miss the bus



Steve Monnington of Mayfield Media Strategies talks to Expo Management Ltd's **Mark Griffin** about the transformation of the business from a single show, to a company with an integrated portfolio of exhibitions and publications for the transport sector.

It's tough enough when an organiser is dependant on a single exhibition for their livelihood, but when the exhibitors insist that the event becomes biennial, the immediate reaction of most people would be to try to fight it. However, the dilemma facing managing director of Leamington-based Expo Management, Mark Griffin was even greater. After the 2003 show, the exhibitors also wanted to move the cycle of the exhibition to the even years and, as it turned out, it wasn't just a case of missing a year in 2005, but deciding on how to deal with the dilemma of a three-year transition.

Griffin has been involved in the coach and bus sector for most of his working life, initially in the family business followed by nearly five years working for the Confederation of Passenger Transport, the trade association for the coach and bus industries. In 1996 he was asked to join Expo Management to run the industry's exhibition Coach and Bus, owned by the association. In 1999, he led a management buyout of Expo Management Ltd whose only asset at the time was the management of the exhibition.

Griffin brought in management contracts such as Emap's London and Scottish bike shows to increase revenue and allow him to create a proper company structure in order to generate the cash flow required to develop their main exhibition. All went according to plan until the day that Griffin refers to as "D-Day", a day that triggered a series of events which have transformed the company.

Griffin describes what happened. "July 23, in 2002, the launch of Coach and Bus 2003, is a day I will always remember. Instead of coming back with their space applications, the industry's major manufacturers presented us with their collective

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view about the future of the exhibition. They wanted one show every two years and to hold that show in the even years. They would support the 2003 show, but the next major event should be 2006, although some manufacturers said they would support a show in 2004."

Why didn't Griffin try to argue the case for continuing with his annual show? "It was more of an ultimatum than a request," Griffin explains. "In addition to the timing change they also wanted more European participation, lower prices and a better promoted event. When companies like

Volvo, Scania and Mercedes tell you what they require, you tend to listen carefully." Griffin's background in the industry meant that he fully understood the dynamics at play. "We had to listen, give them what they wanted, and then work out how to deal with the consequences for our business."

Many small exhibition organisers, faced with the prospect of a significant downturn in revenue, would have opted for rationalisation but Griffin felt that, as the only show in the sector, if they didn't create a new show strategy, someone else would.

Griffin and his team went back to basics and created their strategy from scratch. "We re-aligned the ownership structure with the Confederation of Passenger Transport and created a joint venture for the Coach and Bus events whereby we owned 40 per cent rather than simply managing the main show. The continuing involvement of the CPT was



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crucial as it balanced some of our risk and gave us immediate credibility. However, we reviewed our route to market and decided that we needed to launch a trade publication to underpin the business."

Investing in the resources required for a start-up publication, while dealing with the uncertainties of cash flow from the re-engineering of the exhibition, meant there was a significant cash requirement. "We thought about raising finance by finding new investors but dismissed this as we wanted to be in full control of our own destiny," recalls Griffin. "We opted for a bank loan supported through the DTI's small companies loan initiative."

With the loan in place, Expo Management set off on the first leg of their strategy, held the 2003 Coach and Bus exhibition, and then made plans for 2004 which some of the major manufacturers had said they would support as the last event in the annual cycle. However, this wasn't to be. Griffin explains: "When it came to it, the overall marketing strategies of these companies meant that their support of the 2004 exhibition just didn't happen. They wanted a show, but were content to wait until 2006 to return with their full support. We had no choice but to listen and adjust our strategy and short-term expectations."

Despite this set back, the company pressed on with its plans for the new trade magazine and in November 2003 *Route One*, a weekly title, was launched. In the meantime, Griffin was trying to deal with a three-year gap in the show cycle. "We didn't want to leave the calendar completely empty for a competitor so we ran a small show in 2004 primarily for the suppliers rather than the manufacturers. We managed to get the industry to support a smaller, two-day, low cost show in the alternate odd years so we launched Coach and Bus Live 2005."

During this period, the company also entered into a joint venture with Landor Publishing to run an

annual event called Transport Innovations and in July 2005 the company also acquired the Coach Drivers Club of Great Britain whose publishing assets included the controlled circulation title *Coach Monthly* and a yearbook.

So how is the 2006 exhibition progressing? "We changed the name of Coach and Bus and called it EuroBus Expo to underline its greater European content," Griffin explains. "The show will take place in November at the NEC and has surpassed our expectations. Our own magazine has grown significantly since its launch. It is now considered the market leader in terms of its news content, general editorial position and display advertising, and has ensured that the UK industry fully understands what has happened with the show re-alignment. We also have a much greater profile with the overseas press and so far we have contracted 19,000 net square metres compared to 15,300 square metres sold for the last main show."

The business today is a substantially different one from that memorable day in July 2002. Staff numbers have increased from 10 to 45 and the development of a portfolio of products aimed at the various sectors of the transport industry has

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ensured that the company's dependence on one single product is a thing of the past. Revenue for the year ended 30 April 2002 was £1.2 million and for the coming year is on track to hit £4.5 million.

Looking back, what were the key factors that ensured success? Griffin is very clear about this. "We couldn't have succeeded with the re-invention of the show without launching *Route One* as we needed a strong and completely supportive title. It would also have been much harder without the involvement of the CPT. Its ability to deliver government ministers to the events has given us the additional credibility we needed to pull this off."

Looking back what would Griffin have done differently? "The main thing would have been to raise more finance at the start. We should have created more financial headroom and we have now learnt that we should expect the unexpected. When the promised short-term support of the manufacturers didn't materialise, the resulting three-year gap between major shows created financial strain very early on, and therefore we couldn't afford to recruit senior people quickly

Fact file

Company name: Expo Management Ltd

Years in business: 16 years

Number of employees: 45

Type of business: Exhibitions and publications for transport sector

Main show: EuroBus Expo

Growth strategy: Organic development of exhibitions and launch of related publications

Main challenge: To re-align main trade exhibition for the sector from annual to biennial event

enough. This meant that the magazine was launched much later than originally envisaged."

Advice centre

Based on his experiences over the last four years, Griffin concludes by offering some advice to other small organisers who find themselves in a similar position:

• Know your market

If you think you know your market, go back and know it again. We didn't anticipate the fundamental changes in the manufacturers' businesses and how this would impact on our show.

• Respect the market and don't fight the manufacturers

Your exhibition is a small part of their overall strategy.

• Don't assume you're in control of your own destiny

With one event, the key exhibitors at your show effectively own your business.

• Retain control of your business

If you're confident of your existing management's ability to solve the problem, try to raise bank finance rather than diluting the shareholding.

• Consider in house publishing support

You can't guarantee that outside publications will be with you every step of the way.

• Expect the unexpected

Plan for the unknown by creating additional headroom when arranging finance.

Key milestones

1996: Mark Griffin joins Expo Management Ltd

1999: Management buyout

2002: Manufacturers call for re-alignment of show

2003: Launched publishing division

2005: Acquired Coach Drivers Club of Great Britain

2006: EuroBus Expo will take place in November