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Rockford Charter Coach sees growth as fuel prices rise



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Bill Pfeiffer and Rick Mills of Rockford Charter Coach stand near their new clean-burn environmentally friendly bus. The company's sales have grown at least 30 percent each year since it started.

By Thomas V. Bona

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ROCKFORD — High fuel prices are helping a local company grow, even if it tends to guzzle more than most.

Rockford Charter Coach has increased business steadily since it opened three years ago. Last year, it chartered almost 1,500 buses. This year, it's already almost reached 1,000.

Part of it is natural growth when word of a new business spreads, co-owner Rick Mills said.

But high fuel costs, which have people thinking twice about their travel plans, are playing a big part in the growth.

Rockford Charter Coach

For a list of tours or to request a quote, call 800-332-0906, e-mail charters@rockfordchartercoach.com or visit rockfordchartercoach.com.

“I think you're seeing a lot more groups that are thinking, ‘Rather than spending the extra dollars to take three or four or five cars, let's check into chartering a bus,’” Mills said.

Sales have grown 30 to 40 percent each year since the business started, but they are on an even faster pace this year, Mills said. The company recently added a 10th bus, a new, less-polluting and more fuel-efficient model.

Nationally, motor coach use is on the rise. In 2006 — the most recent year data is available — 631 million people rode the buses, up 6.3 percent the previous year, said Eron Shosteck, spokesman for the American Bus Association.

He expects the 2007 numbers to show similar growth and anecdotally has heard that

bookings this spring are high.

“People are really looking for choices in an era where any form of travel is going to be fraught with hassle and delays and gridlock,” he said.

While the buses typically get 5 to 9 mpg, according to industry data, they also fit around 50 people at a time. So a full bus effectively gets 184 “passenger mpg,” Shosteck said, much more than a packed car can get.

It’s also cheaper per person than flying.

When the Catholic Diocese of Rockford brings high school students to Washington, D.C., for the annual March for Life rally, it uses Rockford Charter Coach. In 2007, it sent one busload off; this year it sent two. Next year, officials hope to send even more.

“They came in at the lowest cost, and they was very pivotal for our first trip out. By the second trip, they already had a good track record,” said Laura Christianson, administrative assistant for the diocese’s Respect Life office. “For large groups, it’s still going to be something that’s doable to get everybody from Point A to Point B at the same time.”

Rockford Charter Coach is based at Chicago Rockford International Airport and typically serves groups within a 70-mile radius, Mills said. The majority of its trips are around three hours.

Besides Rockford-area groups looking to get to theater shows in Chicago or tourism fun in Branson, Mo., the company also caters to groups coming to this area.

The Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau typically refers convention groups, sports teams and others to Rockford Charter.

“It’s great because I can say confidently I trust this business. They know our city excellently, they know our region more than anybody else,” said Theresa Seller, group services manager for the convention and visitors bureau. “I don’t have to print out 1,000 directions.”

Fuel prices take their toll on the business, Mill said. Last month, it added its first fuel surcharge, a 4 percent increase to every contract.

But sales haven’t dropped, he said, and the company is looking to add tours and other options to keep growing.

“We have some things in mind for the future,” Mill said, “but right now we’re having a hard time keeping up with what we’re already doing.”

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