

## The fuel tank isn't half-empty—it's half-full

### Turning high gas prices into an advantage

**B**us operators are understandably concerned about the steadily rising price of diesel fuel, now averaging well over \$4 a gallon. But instead of seeing that as a challenge, it might be worth looking at it as a business opportunity. In other words, the fuel tank isn't half-empty—it's half-full.

The reason for guarded optimism is easy to see, because it's right above the diesel price on that very same fueling station sign. Each time motorcoach operators justifiably cringe at the sight of the price for diesel, they should immediately glance at the gasoline prices listed directly above.

Yes, diesel is still climbing higher than gasoline, but not by much. As of press time for this magazine, gasoline prices are above \$4 per gallon in certain areas of the country, and they are approaching that threshold everywhere else.

So why does that matter? It's simple. High gas prices have finally begun to make Americans reconsider driving their cars everywhere. For motorcoach operators, that means that after years of struggling to devise strategies to get our SUV-addicted nation to consider taking the bus, rising demand for petroleum worldwide has gift-wrapped a marketing opportunity many thought they'd never see. It's just disguised a little by high fuel prices for our industry as well. But make no mistake—this present has a bow on it. When we have such a historical opportunity to offer the motorcoach alternative, we shouldn't look gift horsepower in the mouth.

This is the industry's big chance. Consumers are finally looking for an option other than planes, trains and automobiles. No one is saying high diesel prices aren't causing hardship across the industry. But it does no good to grouse about prices one cannot control. As Dale Carnegie once said, "Cooperate with the inevitable." High fuel prices are here to stay for everybody. So let's strategize about how to make high gasoline prices work for us rather than bemoan how high diesel prices are working against us.

Instead of asking, "How can I survive in this business with fuel prices eating into my already slim margins?" perhaps a better question is, "How can I thrive in this business now that gasoline is four bucks a gallon and we are finally getting people to consider leaving their cars at home?"

No responsible bus operator would ever be expected to rely solely on high gas prices for a boom in his business. At the same time gas prices are working in favor of motorcoaches, operators should still be doing all they can to maximize their coach fleet's fuel economy. Offer refresher courses for drivers on fuel-saving driving habits, such as keeping it a bit below the speed limit, as excess speed slashes fuel economy. Keep those tires properly inflated at all times. Minimize weight by unloading unnecessary cargo between each busload of riders. Check to make sure all belts and hoses are tight and free of leaks. And perform all scheduled routine maintenance at proper service intervals to keep that diesel power plant operating at peak performance.

But beyond those tactical practices to save fuel, motorcoach operators should welcome the weary traveler looking for a solution—one that's hassle-free, convenient, comfortable, affordable and upscale. Tell her to step aboard and experience the modern motorcoach.

If you had the choice between \$1.50 a gallon fuel and the constant worry of losing riders, or \$4 a gallon with the potential of the biggest ridership surge ever, which would you choose? Of course you would choose the latter because you're a savvy businessperson who understands that you can more than make up in new customers what you are spending to fill that coach tank.

That tank really isn't half-empty now, is it? It's half-full, and might soon be packed to capacity—along with every coach in your fleet. ■

