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Staff members at Elite Coach include front row, from left: Brian Kurtz, owner/operations manager; Dawn Dornes, group tours; Denise Keith, charter sales; Stacey Rettew, dispatch; Josie Feeman, marketing/advertising; and Paul Kurtz, owner/president. Shown in the back row, from left: Dave Dickson, owner/fleet manager; Kevin Schadt, charter sales; Doug Dillon, dispatch; Tim Berg, accounting; Beve Robbins, administrative assistant; and Don Henning, group tours.

In Lancaster County, PA

Elite Coach, Founded In 1991, Experiences Steady Growth

By Harrell Kerkhoff
Busline Magazine Editor

Known as “The Garden Spot of America,” Lancaster County, PA, is a popular tourist destination that features pristine beauty and a large Amish/Pennsylvania Dutch settlement. Both old and modern worlds coexist in this famous region located in southeastern Pennsylvania.

“Pristine” is a word that has also been used to describe the equipment and headquarters of **Elite Coach**, a motorcoach operation focused on charter work and located in the Lancaster County community of **Ephrata**.

In business since 1991, Elite Coach has experienced steady growth over the years. Now employing over 50 people, the company’s fleet consists of 24 mostly Prevost motorcoaches and other equipment. This includes a trolley used for weddings and other special events as well as 25-passenger mini-coaches.

Owners of the company are **Paul Kurtz, president**; son **Brian Kurtz, operations manager**; and son-in-law **Dave Dickson, fleet manager**. Elite

Coach’s origins date back to 1991 when three partners (now no longer involved with the company) started the business. In 1997, Paul Kurtz, a long-time businessman who was also working for Elite Coach as a driver, purchased the company and its fleet of (then) 6 coaches.

For a number of prior years, Paul Kurtz had owned a successful farm and home supply retail center. Describing himself as an entrepreneur, he was looking for another business opportunity, which led to his eventual decision to purchase Elite Coach.

“I like to see businesses grow, and there was an opportunity here. I didn’t really have a plan in place. I brought Dave and Brian in and we have since grown the company,” Paul Kurtz said.

Dave Dickson’s decision to join his father-in-law’s new business venture came early.

“I have been with this company since the first day Paul purchased the business,” Dickson explained. “When I walked into the shop (at the company’s facility), it had just been built. There was one work bench and some basic tools. Not one wrench had been turned in that shop when I started.”

Dickson said the experience was intimidating at first as he was starting at Elite Coach without any experience as a mechanic.

“I had worked in the past in facility maintenance and property management. I did know about air conditioning and heating which helped. I also started taking training classes sponsored by different (coach) manufacturers. These programs helped me keep up with the bus maintenance side. There were also a couple of local mechanics who fortunately took me under their wing.”

Toward the end of 1999, Paul Kurtz’s son, Brian, also joined Elite Coach, first starting as a dispatcher. It was at this time the company’s fleet began to grow as well.

“I had only been out of college for a few years. The opportunity came to join Elite Coach, so I decided to come aboard,” Brian Kurtz explained.

Soon after Paul Kurtz purchased the business in 1997, he made the decision to focus on charter work and custom group tours. A retail tour company that had been part of Elite Coach was sold to another business.

“We are still following the same (business) strat-

egy, which is to focus on charters and custom group tours," Brian Kurtz said. "We have had opportunities to branch out into all kinds of different things, but have ultimately decided to focus on bus and motorcoach transportation. We do this very well.

"There is also a lot of work that we conduct for tour companies. We have been able to do this by saying, 'We are not interested in competing directly with you. We will provide transportation services for you so your company doesn't have to purchase its own coaches.'"

Another service Elite Coach provides is a line run operation during the months of January, February and March. The company makes weekly runs during these winter months between various points in Pennsylvania and Florida.

Brian Kurtz said this service started before Paul Kurtz purchased the business in 1997 and remains popular.

"This is the only thing we do, on a regular basis anyway, that is outside of our normal business model. It was started as a service for the local Mennonite and Amish community members who like to travel from Lancaster County to Sarasota, FL, during the winter," Brian Kurtz said. "The service has since expanded. At one point, it was almost 100 percent Mennonite and Amish who traveled, but now its closer to a 50-50 percentage with other people. It's now more of a 'snow bird' market."

Overall, the main service region for Elite Coach consists of the Mid-Atlantic region, although its fleet can be found traveling to many destinations throughout the entire East Coast.

"Most of our work is either going out from Lancaster County or coming in through one of the main gateway cities such as Philadelphia, New York and Washington, D.C.," Brian Kurtz explained. "We service a broad market range as there are a lot of major destination points within a day's driving distance from our facility. I would say we have a bigger market to work with compared to other areas of the country.

"There are a lot of opportunities around the Mid-Atlantic region although Washington, D.C., and New York City are the big draws."

Paul Kurtz added that Elite Coach also enjoys plenty of work coming from various tour companies to such areas as New England, Virginia and South Carolina.

Paul and Brian Kurtz both said, however, that one disadvantage to being located in the Mid-Atlantic region is that there are many competi-

tors, all working to get a large slice of the transportation pie.

"Most of the competition we have is made up of good companies. There are a lot of good operators here. A company must be on top of its game to last in our area," Brian Kurtz said.

Paul Kurtz added that the biggest disadvantage



Elite Coach owners, from left, Paul Kurtz, Dave Dickson and Brian Kurtz are shown at their Pennsylvania facility with some of the company's vehicles.

to being headquartered specifically in Ephrata is that many people simply don't know exactly where the town is located. It can be found just north of the city of Lancaster, the county seat of Lancaster County.

"We like to get the word out that we are located near Lancaster, PA. Most people know Lancaster," Paul Kurtz said.

Quality Equipment Makes The Difference

When it comes to attracting customers in the people transportation business, first impressions are paramount. Therefore, officials at Elite Coach have focused heavily over the years in keeping a modern, uniform and extremely clean fleet of motorcoaches and other equipment.

The company is known for spending a considerable amount of time and money detailing each of its motorcoaches during the slower winter months.

This is done in preparation for the busy spring and summer travel seasons.

"From the very beginning, much of our growth has come as a result of our equipment. We put really nice equipment on the road and employ quality people," Paul Kurtz said. "We have been able to build a solid reputation. We started small, but as more people found out about what type of equipment we were operating, and the level of service we were giving, our business started to grow."

Today, most of the company's fleet of motorcoaches are from Prevost. The relationship between Elite Coach and the manufacturer began in 1997 with the purchase of a single H3-45 motorcoach and has blossomed over the years.

"We have a great relationship with Prevost. They (Prevost) work for us and we work for them," Paul Kurtz said. "We have committed to being a Prevost fleet. That is who we are, which goes a long way in building the relationship."

Being the fleet manager at Elite Coach, Dickson has been very involved in the company's relationship with Prevost as well.

"Prevost, to me, represents a very high standard of service for the industry. This is also the kind of quality service that we want to give to our own customers," he said.

Another solid relationship has been built between Elite Coach and the International Motor Coach Group (IMG), which represents premier motorcoach charter and tour operators throughout the United States and Canada.

"As a company, we are proud to be a member of IMG. This membership has made a positive impact on our company," Brian Kurtz said.

Along with the standard 25-, 47- and 56-passenger mini- and full-size motorcoaches in its fleet, Elite Coach also has entered the VIP coach marketplace. Approximately two years ago the company converted a Prevost H3-45 motorcoach into a 2 and 1-seated, 31 passenger VIP coach. This was done at the request of several clients. The vehicle now includes such amenities as Wi-Fi and satellite TV.

"There is definitely a market out there for this type of (VIP) service. Where we operate, it's not quite as large of a market as if we were in a large city, but we have enough business to keep (the VIP coach) running," Brian Kurtz said. "Because we went into this direction at the request of specific clients, we already had work for the vehicle. The service is becoming more popular as we have started marketing more aggressively."

Elite Coach also has found success with the trolley vehicle it purchased approximately one year ago. According to Brian Kurtz, in response to cur-

rent charter regulations that prohibit transit agencies from now providing charter work, Elite Coach officials saw an opportunity to increase business with a trolley.

"Some of the local transit agencies have been using them for weddings, etc., so we decided to buy one and fix it up. We refurbished the wood on the outside and made it look like a new vehicle," Brian Kurtz said. "We now use it primarily for weddings and other special events in local towns. We have done a pretty good job at getting the word out about our trolley service. It's quite busy on weekends. Of course, the challenge is filling in the gaps. I don't anticipate the trolley will be used for a lot of other different things other than weddings and special events. That is what it's basically designed for anyway. It stays local."

Keeping up with the latest amenities, especially in motorcoach travel, also remains of high importance for officials at Elite Coach.

"Our coaches are immaculately cleaned and we feature such standards as wireless mics for tour guides, DVDs and video monitors," Brian Kurtz said. "Clients are also able to use their computers for presentations during company meetings while on our coaches."

Dickson added that demand for Wi-Fi is becoming more prevalent among various customer groups, while the push for satellite TV is less strong at the current time among clients.

"It's a constant struggle, however, to stay up on technology. We have to ask ourselves, 'What are we going to put into our coaches next? And how are we best retrofitting what we have with the different makes and models?'" Dickson said.

When it comes to amenities, Paul Kurtz added that the main objective is for the entire Elite motorcoach fleet to be uniform.

"If somebody hires four of our coaches, they are going to get four of the same vehicles. We have really focused on a consistent fleet, and I think this pleases a lot of customers," Paul Kurtz said.

Brian Kurtz added that it took Elite Coach some time to get to the point where it can offer a truly uniform fleet.

"We have been working at this for a number of years and have finally reached the point where all of our vehicles look the same," he said. **"We started a few years ago to put new graphics on our newer coaches and ended up repainting and detailing the entire fleet. These vehicles also contain the same amenities. It's very important that we offer a consistent product."**

Paul Kurtz added that the company's color scheme of deep burgundy and gold adds to the desired high-end look.

"It's really a sharp look and is neat to see when a group of six to eight of our coaches are going down the road together. There is no question as to whose coaches they belong to," he said. "We are really fussy about how our vehicles look."

Relying on other technological advances such as DriveCam video event recorders and GPS units has helped Elite Coach provide a safer and more secure ride for its various customers. Brian Kurtz said

from a management standpoint, it's been a huge benefit to have extra eyes on the road thanks to today's technology.

"We can track our vehicles and their speed, which greatly helps with operating safely," Brian Kurtz said. "Of course, there are other advances found on today's coaches that are equally important such as modern multiplexing systems. This has been a huge boost to the maintenance side of our business."

Dickson added that Elite Coach has always kept technology at the forefront in importance, whether this technology is used on the vehicle itself or in the office/shop area. This focus has paid off.

"One thing you don't want to do as a company is constantly struggle with day-to-day tasks, such as problems with the computer system. If you have the right software programs in place, and are diligent in keeping technology working properly in other areas, this all helps employees focus on what truly needs to get done," he said. "We like to think that we have set the bar high in the areas of customer service, personnel and equipment."

In another area of technology, Elite Coach maintains a modern, customer-friendly Web site (www.elitecoach.com) that is full of useful tips and company information for those interested in motorcoach travel. This includes a section on the site titled "The Elite Advantage." In this section, 11 points are listed featuring important information consumers should know when trying to make an informed decision on hiring a motorcoach company.

"It's an attempt to educate the public on how to shop for an operator. We have put a lot of time and effort regarding our Web presence," Brian Kurtz said.

Paul Kurtz added that the company's Web site includes useful information but at the same time is simple to navigate.

"We re-worked our Web site a couple of years ago and have since received positive feedback. It's designed to sell our company to somebody who may be browsing the Internet and trying to choose between companies based on what he/she sees," he explained.

When it comes to marketing, Brian Kurtz stated that the No. 1 principle is to offer a consistent product.

"We have put a lot of money toward the curb appeal of our vehicles. We also provide traditional marketing tools as well. We have a marketing director on staff who is involved in a lot of different projects," Brian Kurtz said. "Learning how to market through the Internet has definitely been our biggest push as of late. It's important to learn how to use that technology effectively in getting the word out about our company.

"We also do a lot of basic stuff, such as sending out thank you and response cards, mailings and conducting research into new opportunities and markets. Our promotional material is designed to match the product we put out on the road. The idea is to have a consistent voice the whole way through."

Successful marketing of Elite Coach has also been accomplished through such simple steps as leaving a basket full of company business cards

available at the front of each vehicle.

"It's amazing how much work we get from people who pick up our business cards," Paul Kurtz said. "Even though a person may not be traveling with his/her company when picking up one of our cards, there is always the possibility that the card will be used in the future. Providing these business cards has done a lot for us."

Being Clean Is All In The Details

The fine art of auto detailing is said to have started in southern California many years ago. The practice involves a thorough cleaning, polishing and waxing of an automobile, both inside and out. This is done to produce a show-quality level of clean. Officials at Elite Coach have used this practice for its entire fleet of motorcoaches during the winter months, getting them ready for service once the busy spring travel season arrives.

"We go through our entire fleet and detail inside and out. It takes about three days to detail one coach. This usually includes two people inside and one or two people outside the coach," Brian Kurtz said. "We strip the seats out and detail from top the bottom, inside and out. This process has become our signature. It's something our customers now expect and a way to get a leg up on the competition."

As fleet manager, Dickson feels it's of utmost importance for Elite Coach to maintain the cleanest vehicles possible. This is achieved not only through daily cleanings — including the use of on-board vacuum cleaners — but through the company's extensive detailing program as well.

"We provide a higher level of cleanliness and our employees have gotten on board. In the winter, we have three to four people spending three months detailing each and every one of our coaches," Dickson said. "It's one of the most strenuous jobs we do here. There is also a considerable expense involved to employ these three to four people full time, especially during the winter which is traditionally our slow season.

"We wipe everything down and strip and wax the floors. It's quite a process. We wax and buff the outside, including the roofs, to help shed the dirt and keep the oxidation process from taking place."

Keeping the company's entire facility, including its shop area, well maintained is also a virtue at Elite Coach. The facility is located on five-plus acres of land and includes a five-bay garage built specifically for the company. Four of the bays are designed for maintenance work, while the fifth serves as a wash bay.

"We encourage our customers to visit here," Brian Kurtz said. "It's a huge selling point. If we can get a customer to look at our facility, we almost always end up building a relationship. He/she can see what we do and how good we take care of our equipment. The process works very well for us."

"I don't know if anyone has ever walked into our facility who didn't comment on its cleanliness," Dickson added. "This really motivates employees such as mechanics and wash bay people. Coming into a clean shop helps them want to work harder. Everybody has gotten on board. I tried to instill this focus from day one and have had some really good employees stand behind me."

Elite Coach has also earned a solid reputation for providing quality service. Not only does the company maintain its own fleet of vehicles, it also regularly works on motorcoaches and motor homes owned by other companies or individuals.

"I think it says a lot about our maintenance capabilities when we have a dozen or so people bringing in their expensive private motor homes to be serviced. Some of these people come from as far away as Washington, D.C.," Paul Kurtz said.

Elite Coach enjoys a good working relationship as well with other motorcoach operators when it comes to vehicle maintenance.

"Because of where we are located, and our status with Prevost, we provide a lot of work on coaches owned by other companies," Brian Kurtz said.

Dickson added that over the years his company has been able to gain a reputation for high-end service.

"It's a business that has been developed within our existing motorcoach business. Between motor home owners and seated coach companies, we probably have 30 or 40 regular customers. At any given time, there is at least one, if not two, vehicles at our facility that are owned by other people, to be serviced," Dickson said. "This has helped us become successful, diversified and stay busy, even during the customary slow periods of the year.

"Fortunately, our motor home customers usually need their work done after they come back from Florida in the spring. This is the same time when our motorcoaches have usually already been serviced and are out on the road. Right now (during the winter), we are busy in the shop servicing our own vehicles while the motor home customers are in the south. It all works out."

This diversification has helped Elite Coach develop a niche within the local transportation marketplace. Dickson said much of this can be attributed toward the company's loyal employee base.

"People say success starts at the top, but it takes a whole lot of help at all levels to truly be successful. We fortunately have great employees at Elite Coach. They have been the biggest blessing for us as owners," he said.

Keeping a quality staff of mechanics has helped Elite Coach maintain its solid reputation in the shop.

"Our mechanics spend a lot of time learning. Because we put so much time and effort in keeping our own equipment up, these mechanics have developed into experts," Brian Kurtz explained. "We have very low turnover at our

company. Most of the people who work for us have been here for a long time, which has its advantages. Our employees gain knowledge over the years and this knowledge continues to grow and compound.

"The last mechanic we hired actually had worked as one of our vendors. When he decided to leave his job, he specifically decided that there were two companies he wanted to work for and one of them was Elite Coach. He saw our equipment and how our shop was kept. He knew that if he was going to work somewhere as a mechanic, this was one of the places he

drivers. According to Paul Kurtz, Elite Coach has been successful over the years in both finding and keeping quality drivers, and then giving them the proper tools to succeed. This includes good equipment and training.

"Our drivers play a huge part in customer service success, along with our sales people and everybody else in the office," Paul Kurtz said. "I often hear positive comments from customers who tell me they appreciate the help they receive from our employees."

The first order of business when looking for driver candidates is finding people who truly



Elite Coach owner/fleet manager Dave Dickson, far left, is shown with mechanics Nelson Good, Phil Kocan, Jared Morgan — all kneeling — and Tom Morgan.

wanted to be."

One new focus for Elite Coach within its vehicle maintenance department is a road service operation the company has now developed within its region. Officials recently purchased a work truck and equipped it with a mechanic on call and such amenities as an air compressor, generator and safety lights.

"We can perform just about any type of maintenance while on the road," Dickson said. "This effort has developed into a 24 hour/7 day-a-week on-call type of service. It's available to anybody who is in the area and needs help with a bus. It has really taken off.

"People now know that if they are in the Lancaster area, Elite Coach can support them if their (bus or coach) breaks down. We will do our best to get them up and running again. We have traveled as far as Baltimore, MD, with this service. Our mechanics also like to provide this type of work."

The Motorcoach Driver: A Field Of Professionalism

In order to provide quality customer service, all areas within a business must excel. For a motorcoach company, one major area of importance is that of hiring and training of good

understand what the profession entails.

"When we are hiring drivers, we tell them that being able to safely drive a coach is a given. If they can't do that they are not going to be considered for employment," Brian Kurtz said. "The other area that they have to bring to the table is the ability to work well with people. They have to understand people and how the dynamics of a group work. It's important our drivers have the ability to interact professionally. This is true not only with customers on the coach, but while also working with hosts, escorts and tour company representatives themselves.

"We have a lot of drivers who arrive from other professional positions where they have had significant experience with people. It's not enough to just be nice. You actually have to understand how to deal with others. It's something that is very difficult to train. You almost have to hire that ability off the bat. We do provide, however, a lot of customer service training. There are 12 customer service standards that we put in place that every employee in the company must follow. They are high standards."

Both Brian and Paul Kurtz are involved with the driver training aspect of their company.

"There is a fine line between professionalism and being the person who just drives and tells



Elite Coach employees take pride in the company's well-maintained and very clean shop area.

jokes. In our company, we really try to emphasize the professional part of the position," Paul Kurtz explained. "Truck driving is one thing. You often pull into a big place with a big parking lot and back up to a large loading dock. In our industry, however, drivers must get their vehicles into very tight places, some of which probably shouldn't even be entered with a motorcoach. Our drivers are also dealing with people who want to be at a certain place at a certain time. There are many deadlines to meet. It's a position with a tremendous amount of responsibility."

When looking to hire a driver, Paul Kurtz first takes that individual out to an empty lot that features a course made up of highway safety cones.

"I don't care if that person has driven two million miles in a past job, he/she must go out with me on that lot. The course is designed to make sure that the driver sees all four corners of the vehicle when maneuvering," Paul Kurtz said. "It's a tough course. I also take (driving candidates) out on the road where they ride with me first. I show them how I want a coach to be operated and then we go from there."

He added that if a person wants to drive a motorcoach for Elite Coach, he/she must learn to drive "the back of the motorcoach."

"Anybody can drive a car from the front, but when you are driving a motorcoach, you steer from the front but must drive the back. We work on that a lot with people," Kurtz said. "You have to know where that back end is going. It's important to use the front end to get wide enough to make sure the back end goes to the proper place."

Brian and Paul Kurtz admitted that becoming a driver for Elite Coach can be intimidating. A tough training regimen is set up to make sure those who pass are ready to go out on the road with a vehicle full of people.

"We have had candidates who have come to us after driving a truck for 20 or 30 years and have not been able to make it through our training program. Either they couldn't do it or couldn't accept the fact that they were not the best driver out there," Brian Kurtz said. "I provide the classroom training. We use the International Motor Coach Group (IMG) training program, which IMG companies have set up. It's an extensive program and involves not only a lot of classroom time but over-the-road work as well. We have also added to this training program."

"We set the bar high from the very beginning and it does scare some people off. These are people who may come in here thinking they are going to just jump on a bus and drive. All of a sudden they realize there is a lot of effort that must take place on their part. It weeds people out. If they are not willing to put the time and effort into this position, then we are not the place for them."

Keeping Up With Future Demands

As Elite Coach enters a new decade, many challenges and opportunities await the business. According to Paul Kurtz, one of the main questions company officials must ask themselves is, "How large should we grow in the future?"

"I feel we, as a company, are somewhere in the mid-range level as far as size in our industry. The challenge for us is not necessarily in sales and finding opportunities, but once we start to get beyond a certain size, how do we keep the quality of our operation in place?" Paul Kurtz said. "I think the bigger you get the more challenging this becomes. As we have grown over the years, we have been able to keep the quality of our company up, but it's taken a great deal of effort."

One of the challenges many smaller business-

es face today, he added, is that of complying with government regulations that can be a drain on both time and money. Competing for good employees is a challenge as well, although today's high unemployment rate has lessened this challenge as of late.

Brian Kurtz added that there have been two keys to the past success of Elite Coach.

"No. 1, we understand business. Paul (Kurtz) has been involved with numerous businesses over the years. When we (Paul and Brian Kurtz and Dave Dickson) entered the motorcoach industry, we knew about business and we learned the industry. Our focus on business has been one key to success," Brian

Kurtz said. "No. 2, **it's not the one thing you do 1,000 percent better, it's the 1,000 things you do 1 percent better. This has been the bottom line for our company. It's about doing everything on a day-to-day basis the best we can do.** If this type of culture goes through an entire company, then that company will ultimately end up successful."

For the future, Brian Kurtz added that company officials must become experts in technology.

"It's the only way we can survive and grow. We must also focus on running as efficiently as possible because there are going to be a lot of regulations that we will have to comply with, and navigating this challenge will take a lot of ingenuity. We must have the resources to accomplish this focus. The companies that don't have these resources are going to be in trouble," Brian Kurtz said. "As I look at the next couple of years, our focus should be on the basics and making sure we build a solid foundation. It's going to be both challenging and interesting. I predict that within the next 10 years this industry will not look the same as it does right now, and we intend to be around as a company."

"I feel there will be a lot of opportunities to come in the future (for companies in the motorcoach industry). Those people who are innovative and keep their noses to the grindstone will enjoy these opportunities."

Paul Kurtz added that he feels fortunate to have started with Elite Coach when it was smaller and was able to incorporate some high expectations.

"We were able to grow our company's positive culture as the business grew. It's important to continue this focus," he said.

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