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PICTURES: Magnus Rew

City DNA critical to SNC’s success

Ralph Morton

↙ SLEEPY TONBRIDGE in genteel Kent. Perhaps not quite where you expect an upmarket chauffeur firm to be based, but that’s how Stuart Newport, owner of SNC Cars likes it. He lives here. Likes it. And so do his customers.

That’s not to say the cold wind of recession hasn’t blown through this leafy retreat of the City well-heeled. On the contrary, Stuart has downsized his business from 10 to six cars over the past four years, pointing to a 40% drop in turnover as certain City-based companies have shrunk, while others have put a stop on travel.

Indeed, the pressure on travel costs remains. Stuart has seen some of his customers

continuing to use the services of SNC Cars, and while they pay the full price, ask for a receipt showing a fare that’s 30% less than actual cost.

“We’re seeing some customers that still want to use us, but because their companies want to see a reduction in travel cost, our customers are shouldering some of the bill themselves,” explains Stuart. “Not all. But it’s an interesting trend I’ve noticed.”

Stuart, though, believes this contraction is a temporary state of affairs. “I see it expanding,” he says. “The City is picking up and as a business we follow the City. When we’re busy there’s lots of mergers and acquisition activities. When not, we cool down.”

Stuart reckons the upturn



for his business will come in September, post-election, post-summer. “People have been uncertain on investment. Once the post-election period is over people will have an idea on the tax implications for their business. And there’s always a lull in the summer. So I expect it to kick off again in September.”

Over the next 24 months, Stuart plans for his company to expand to 12 cars as the economy strengthens. The City is crucial to SNC Cars. Stuart himself has a history in both retail and City banking; his drivers, too, have also worked in the City. And this is critical to the success of SNC Cars, he reckons.

“Many of our drivers are ex-City. They’ve led a varied

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previous life, so they know how to deal with the clients that we have. That's essential—they're so fussy! They keep chopping and changing their bookings. In many ways we are their automotive PA. We're an organiser for them. They know we can deliver for them and have empathy and understanding for their business. The other thing is discretion—that's a must for all our drivers, whatever the situation."

Stuart has been running his business since August 1997. And says, despite the downturn, he would still do the same again. "I spotted a gap in the market in this area. There were only cabs, which were inconsistent and unreliable. So I started a bespoke, niche service for chauffeur-driven cars," says Stuart, who created demand for the start-up business by distributing an A5 black and white brochure—professionally copywritten—at Sevenoaks railway station.

"By Christmas I had enough business for five drivers and since then it's all been word of mouth, backed up by a good website." Stuart maintains a very personal, bespoke approach to the business. All the cars have number plates that end in SNC, although the drivers are self-employed. And the cars have to be Mercedes.

"If you were to see three adverts featuring one Audi, one BMW, one Mercedes, the client would always go for the Mercedes," reckons Stuart. "Clients feel comfortable with the brand. You can run older Mercedes but because of the brand's values, customers always feel secure."

Currently SNC Cars runs four Mercedes E-Class and two S-Class. The minimum hire fare is £75. "We buy the cars, because of the high mileages—



SNC CARS

OWNER: Stuart Newport, based in Tonbridge, Kent
FLEET: 4 x Mercedes E-Class; 2 x Mercedes S-Class
Website: www.SNCCars.co.uk

Stuart's tips for running a chauffeur business

- **MINIMISE YOUR OVERHEADS**
—this is critical
- **NEVER START WITH A DEBT**
- **DON'T STOP DRIVING**
—keep in touch with clients
- **BUSINESS CONTINUITY**
—a PA to take the calls while you're driving or on holiday."

I have Clare. She remotely accesses everything and operates like a virtual PA. She runs the business when I'm not here," he says.

a lease isn't available." Stuart, who has just bought a new E-Class E250 Avantgarde, says he and his drivers average anywhere between 65,000-75,000 miles a year. And the secret is to keep them for three years and within warranty.

"If you let them go outside

their warranty then you can be in trouble. One driver had the torque converter go on his S-Class, which costs £3,000 to repair; and within days of being repaired the Comand information system went at a cost of £2,700. For someone who does our job that's ruination and no holidays for 18 months..."

Stuart has financed his car on hire purchase through his local dealership, which provides him with a replacement car should it ever be required.

In fact, Stuart has nothing but praise for the way Mercedes-Benz of Tonbridge looks after him. "All the maintenance is done there and they look after us well," says Stuart. "For example, if I had a problem right now, the guys would squeeze me in and I would be back on the road the next day, even if they had

to order me a part."

SNC Cars keeps itself busy with 70 jobs a week shared equally between all the drivers. The majority of the work is either early in the morning or later in the evening.

Stuart has six key points around which he operates his chauffeur business: reliability; consistency; brand (Mercedes with SNC plates); instantly reachable by clients; an understanding of your clients ("you need to gain loyalty which means you need good communication with them"); and discretion.

I wondered what Stuart's low point had been during his 13 years of running SNC Cars. There was not a moment's hesitation: 9/11. Stuart says the al-Qaeda suicide attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, meant work stopped. Instantly. In contrast, Stuart says the best moment has been remaining solvent during the worst recession in recent history.

Given the tough trading conditions, the reduced profit margins and the current contraction of his chauffeur fleet, would Stuart consider embarking on the same course in retrospect? "Would I do the same again? Oh yes, I think I would. I enjoy the job."

Clearly, with Stuart's expansion plans, there's still plenty more to come from this niche operation, quietly operation in Tonbridge. Well, discretion is one of Stuart's watchwords.



HAVE YOU GOT A STORY TO TELL?

We're always looking for interesting companies in the industry to feature in *Professional Driver*. We're especially interested if you have an unusual or innovative approach to business, if you operate an interesting fleet of cars, or if you've got something to say about the issues that affect the business. Drop the editor a line at prodrivermag@aol.com