

AFFILIATE MANAGERS

Tell It Like It Is

Affiliate business: It's what allows a company to say yes to transportation across the country, to handle a large group move, to book a motorcoach it doesn't currently have in its fleet, or save the day when a valued customer calls last minute for ride when all your vehicles are already on other runs. Ask any operator why they attend industry events and one of their top reasons will always be to meet new affiliates—admit it, it's one of the reasons you go, too. We're lucky to operate in a highly collaborative industry where local competitors are "friendly" and a small, mom-and-pop service with five cars can essentially be a global transportation provider.

At the helm of this work is the affiliate manager, who is tasked with vetting then maintaining and nurturing these all-important relationships worldwide. These oft-unsung heroes are frequent miracle workers, using their powers to make the impossible seem like nothing at all, or at least business as usual. We spoke with four busy affiliate managers who offered their insight into their time on the job and what you can do to be a better affiliate.



RENEE FERRARO
ZBest WW Chauffeured Transportation
Glen Burnie, Md.

What are the biggest challenges you face as an affiliate manager (from other limo companies and/or clients)?

In my situation, it's locating affiliates with ADA/wheelchair-accessible vehicles or other specific types of vehicles that our clients are requesting.

What advice do you have for a company that's a relative newcomer to this side of the industry?

It is a must to attend all of the limousine industry shows so you get the chance to meet different affiliates from all over the world. We are a pretty close group and are all here to help and learn from each other so that we all can be the best.

Are there any common problems you experience?

Yes, unfortunately we run across companies that aren't honest about the vehicles in their fleet or have payment issues.

What should a company look for when shopping around for a new/replacement affiliate?

I feel it is extremely important to personally visit their site to see what vehicles they have as well as what goes on in their office. For us, efficiency in getting confirmations and payment is of major importance.

Should you have multiple affiliates in one market, and why?

I believe you should have three top affiliates in every area. Depending on the dates and events in the region—as well as the amount of vehicles required for your group—you will need to have backup companies that you can count on. Also, today's affiliates are really only working with companies that give them work back, so you want to share your farm-outs as well.

Do you network or brand yourself differently when you're looking for affiliate work instead of "just" representing your company?

No, I use our brand name to my advantage. Because we focus on having the newest vehicles in our fleet, which definitely helps me when selling our services, we look for the same from the affiliates who are representing us.

What's something you would like the industry to know or better understand about your job?

Being an affiliate manager really entails learning more about other companies and what they do as well as how they handle their situations. We are all here to keep clients happy and to make sure their transportation needs are met. We make a lot of great friends in this industry, and belong to different affiliate groups, but they help us learn how we could better handle situations that occur. It does not mean that we will only do work with affiliates in that group. Affiliate managers do stick together but are obviously willing to work with others.

The challenges of finding a great affiliate are:

Trusting that the affiliate company really does have the vehicle you're requesting and that they will give you the information needed, such as the chauffeur's name and cell number, as well as their on-location, on-board, and drop times. It's also about trusting that they can be honest if something goes wrong, and are willing to do what it takes to keep clients happy.

What are some of the best ways to meet a new affiliate?

It is a necessity to attend all the trade shows. Being on social media like LinkedIn has helped me as well. Also word of mouth: Good and bad experiences can make or break you.

What makes a good affiliate?

A great affiliate is a company that is always there for you, is willing to admit their wrongdoings, and will do whatever it takes to keep you and your clients happy. We all make mistakes, but it is how you handle them that makes you good.

What are the challenges of doing international affiliate work (e.g., language, currency, service level, etc.)?

One of our biggest challenges is making sure that we have the all-in rate converted correctly into U.S. dollars, but also knowing if they charge more for credit card transactions. Most international companies do have English-speaking employees, which is very helpful. We are aware that they do tend to have different vehicle types than what we have and they are always willing to advise us.

What do you do when you're overbooked and get a call from an affiliate late in the game?

We are honest, apologize, and let them know that we are booked, but if we do know someone in the area that can help, we will advise them.



AMI NICHELSON
Omni Limousine
Las Vegas, Nev.

What are the biggest challenges you face as an affiliate manager (from other limo companies and/or clients)?

In the past, my biggest challenge was finding the right affiliate in cities I have never done business in while hoping they will do a good job. However, with the growth of peer groups, you now have a selection of 20 affiliate managers available to you all the time, and nine times out of 10, someone will have the right partner in the area you need.

Are there any myths about affiliate work that you want to dispel?

Not sure about myths, but I do still hear that some companies do not focus on affiliate work. I, for one, believe that affiliate work is vital to every company. The more Omni Limousine branches out into outbound work, we see that it is a great way to drive revenue and grow the business to new heights.

What advice do you have for a company that's a relative newcomer to this side of the industry?

My advice would be to make sure you attend the industry trade shows. Having an incredible industry full of mentors and speakers willing to share their knowledge and business practices is invaluable—we have the opportunity to learn from the best. Also, the dedicated affiliate programs during these shows are, in my opinion, the best way to get face to face with potential partners. I strongly believe the Affiliate Central event at the Chauffeur Driven Show has been important for the growth of our affiliate business both inbound and outbound.

What should a company look for when shopping around for a new/replacement affiliate? Should you have multiple affiliates in one market, and why?

What I look for is a company that has the same level of service and expectations that we have. The experience of our client is the most important thing, not the affiliate's office or their computer or phone systems. I care most about the courtesy given to my client while in their care. I do believe you should have multiple affiliates in a market as there will be a time that your number one may not be able to service your request, so you will need to have your number two available and ready.

What's something you would like the industry to know or better understand about your job?

I believe the industry today knows how important the affiliate program is to their companies and how the affiliate manager is key to the program's success.

What are some of the best ways to meet a new affiliate?

Without a doubt, the industry trade shows are the way to meet new affiliates and strengthen the relationships you currently have.

What makes a good affiliate?

In a word: honesty. I believe the more transparent we are with our partners, the better we can work together to handle everything that may occur.

What are the challenges of doing international affiliate work?

While I have not done a ton of international work, in the little I have done, the time difference has been a challenge.

What are the steps you take following nonpayment?

We don't seem to run into this issue frequently, but it does happen from time to time. I like to reach out to the client/affiliate and try and discuss options to either get paid in full or work with them on a payment plan to clear the debt.

What do you do when you get a quote from an affiliate that is higher than your normal rate?

I will usually contact the affiliate to see if there is a reason for the price difference and then discuss options to meet the client's needs.

What do you do when you're overbooked and get a call from an affiliate late in the game?

This happens very often during Las Vegas convention season. I usually will do my best to have a few reserved vehicles tucked away for my partners. Affiliate managers are magicians; we just make things happen.



TERESA STIVERS
International Limousine Service
Washington, D.C.

What are the biggest challenges you face as an affiliate manager? (From other limo companies and/or clients)

It's a lot of making sure that all our affiliates are vetted properly, but also ensuring that the process from the reservation to the chauffeur is seamless and top-notch between the companies.

Are there any myths about affiliate work that you want to dispel?

I think one of the biggest things in affiliate circles is that an affiliate has to send you work in order to have a relationship. I don't necessarily believe that. I think it's great if they do—don't get me wrong—but sometimes you can have a fantastic affiliate who does not reciprocate your work. I have high-profile passengers and work with companies because they are a quality organization that will do a good, consistent job.

What advice do you have for a company that's a relative newcomer to this side of the industry? Are there any growing pains that are typically the hardest to overcome?

Networking at trade shows, talking to other affiliate managers, and joining affiliate manager groups are all beneficial. You can learn a lot from each other. One of the ways we overcame our growing pains was taking the time to properly train staff on affiliate work, so that they understand that affiliates are customers just like any other corporate account. You have to make sure that all of the policies and procedures of your affiliate company are in place and followed by your team.

What should a company look for when shopping around for a new/replacement affiliate? Should you have multiple affiliates in one market, and why?

I like to get referrals from people in my groups or by calling other affiliate managers to get a recommendation from them. We try to have up to three affiliates in each market we serve, in case someone is booked—you need to be confident to immediately go onto the second or third tier of affiliates.

How do you vet?

I meet a lot of them through the shows and my affiliate managers group. Also, I send out an affiliate agreement. Whenever possible, I do a site visit, but not as often as I would like.

What's something you would like the industry to know or better understand about your job?

The affiliate position is constantly evolving. You have to keep up with this ever-changing industry, the clients' needs, and the trends. I also think technology is huge and something that all industry companies need to keep pace with by making sure that their app and online reservations are working well. I have customers, as we all do, who strictly book online, so you have to keep up with the latest booking technology.

What makes a good affiliate?

We try to have an affiliate mirror the type of company that we run at International. I look for an affiliate who shares the same philosophy, policies, and procedures. I think that is the foundation of what makes a good affiliate.

What are the challenges of doing international affiliate work (e.g., language, currency, service level, etc.)?

I think some of the biggest challenges are the insurance qualifications and getting insurance certificates. Also, ensuring that we have English-speaking chauffeurs has sometimes been a problem, but not often. Time zone differences have created issues, especially for dispatchers making their due-diligence calls an hour before, etc. We haven't had any issues with currency or equivalent levels of service.

What are the steps you take following nonpayment?

We really don't run into this very often to be honest; but if it happens, I make the initial phone call, instead of our accounting department, to find out exactly what is going on. We do have some billed accounts, but the majority of affiliates use credit card payments. It doesn't seem to be a big problem for us.

What do you do when you get a quote from an affiliate that is higher than your normal rate?

I will definitely start with a phone call to the affiliate to explain the situation and to see if we can come to a compromise. Again, it's not usually a problem. We're all in the same industry and do the same thing so they generally understand and are very easy to work with. But in the times we've had to deal with this, I've always placed the call and negotiated.

What do you do when you're overbooked and get a call from an affiliate late in the game?

I've definitely had this happen before, especially during inauguration or some other big events in D.C. Basically, I would advise the affiliate that we are unable to cover the ride because of the event; however, I would offer them the option of a trusted subcontractor who would be able to provide service. We only use two other companies for subcontract work and they are very close to us in terms of level of service.



STEPHEN WARD
Above All Transportation/Boston Car Service
Boston, Mass.

What are the biggest challenges you face as an affiliate manager?

It used to be finding affiliates. You used to have to get on a plane and check out their facility. Now, with all kinds of technology, you can talk to people who've been there and done that. So that part—finding

new affiliates—has become a lot easier.

The challenge now is the follow-through afterward: being able to vet people, set them up, and foster communication between your staff and their staff.

Are there any myths about affiliate work that you want to dispel?

It's rare to find an affiliate manager who is only an affiliate manager. It's the nature of the industry, especially when your company is small but growing and you go the shows. Do you want to bring all of these employees who'll go off in different directions, or do you only bring four or five people who can hit the ground running?

Reciprocity is another myth. I don't expect to get back the work I send to Las Vegas or Florida—those are destinations. You can't go around saying, "Oh, but you don't use me back." I'll work with everybody! For me, I work with people I feel comfortable with.

What are the benefits of farming in/out affiliate work?

If you set it up correctly, it's not that hard and you can do more business. I try to teach my staff to keep an eye on it. We used to have it all set up so that there was a separate screen for farm-outs. Instead, we've integrated our affiliate work into our regular dispatch so they it can be dispatched and monitored in real time along with our in-town Boston work. No matter where it is in the world, it's being handled the same across the globe.

What advice do you have for a company that's a relative newcomer to this side of the industry?

I didn't know anything when I first started. The best advice I can offer is don't just look at the money: Look at the benefit.

I'm shocked that so many people just make a phone call and go with the first company that answers without any vetting. You don't know who or what you're getting, and you're putting your company at risk and your name on the line when you don't thoroughly investigate or get to know your affiliates. If you're dealing with someone for the first time, at least make sure you get a credit card because you just don't know what could happen.

Of course, it goes from one extreme to the other: It's either a call out of the blue asking if we can do this job or an email asking if we can fill out a 300-page affiliate report. It would be great if we could, as affiliates, come up with a model that all companies could use.

What should a company look for when shopping around for a new/replacement affiliate? Should you have multiple affiliates in one market, and why?

You should always have multiple affiliates, always. You'll have your go-to company, but there will be times when they're busy so you need backup you can trust.

You have to look at their pricing and vehicles to see if they're comparable to your fleet. Some of the companies you'll want to work with are ones you haven't heard of yet. For me, I have groups I belong to, and I have affiliates I've met at the shows or are just people I know.

I do my homework. The first thing I'm going to do is send the affiliates I'm considering an email: I'm looking for response times. I'll probably wait two days to see if they reply. I expect that only half will respond—so the rest are out. Next, I call. Who picks up the phone? Was it a recording? Did someone answer? Did they help me, put me on hold, or did they say the affiliate manager will call me back?

Do you network or brand yourself differently when you're looking for affiliate work instead of "just" representing your company?

No, I represent my company. At one of our peer group meetings, we agreed that being an affiliate manager is only one of the things we do.

I don't know many affiliate managers who do just one thing for their company. For me, I'm also our COO. People I meet at the industry shows often joke, "Shouldn't your business card have 30 other titles on it?"

What's something you would like the industry to know or better understand about your job?

As affiliate managers, we cross our t's and dot our i's: We make sure that everything matches up for our passengers so it's seamless for them. When I talk to my affiliates, I tell them I want them to do A, B, C, and D the same way I do, so it's just like my clients are in Boston with my chauffeurs, even if they're in China or Italy. It's making their experience seamless, no matter what part of the world they're in.

What makes a good affiliate?

I always say there's a certain kind of personality that thrives in this industry, and that is especially true for affiliate managers. Mostly, it's responsiveness. I think I'm a good affiliate because I'm responsive, especially when something goes wrong. I understand things happen, but it's how you respond to those mistakes for your client or affiliate that makes or breaks a company. If I screw up, I'm going to man up and say that there's no charge—is your company going to do the same?

Tell the truth. I don't lie to my clients: They don't think I have cars in every city in the world, but they do know that I have partners all over the globe with the same mindset and values.

What are the challenges of doing international affiliate work?

If it's done correctly on both sides, there isn't much of a challenge. The one issue my staff has is calling internationally. I set up clocks for them to accommodate the time change—besides, they all have smartphones and can figure out the time difference easily. Some of the international companies even have local numbers now.

What do you do when you get a quote from an affiliate that is higher than your normal rate?

I have a template just for my affiliates. When they book a job, I send it to them and it's filled out. If there's a problem with billing, my pricing is already on the job—I know what my pricing is, and so should our affiliates. Sometimes pricing sheets are treated like a secret, and that's a big issue for me. If the price comes out higher than what we originally discussed, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. But going into it, I need to know what I'm being charged. I gave you this job, I can pay for what I said I would, and I expect the same. **[CD]**

