

Tim Crockett, president of AirComm, in front of the Chicago Stock Exchange entrance arch, now housed at the Art Institute of Chicago



SEVERAL months out from the Olympic Games in London, Tim Crockett, owner of Chicago-based AirComm Chauffeured Services, is already in the thick of it. He's jetting off to meetings, writing and editing detailed playbooks, brainstorming with the planners, and working out the last-minute kinks. He already has the cars secured, and he's ensuring that all of the chauffeurs are properly background checked. He'll soon complete dry runs with the chauffeurs and the event planners so that they know the proper route to follow and what the protocol will be. The smallest, most seemingly insignificant details have been considered and accounted for. When it comes time for the event, he and the AirComm team will be more than ready for the challenge.

It's not like this is Crockett's first rodeo. He and his office staff have been working with meeting planners to coordinate and handle these types of events for close to two decades. The fact that it's taking place across the pond is inconsequential. Language and culture barriers can be bridged with the assistance of translators and meeting planners who are in tune with the local customs.

"Right now he's working on plans for events in places as far away as India, Rio de Janeiro, and Munich to name a few, but also many more in the United States."

Crockett's company has handled a cross-section of events like the Golden Globes, Super Bowls in a variety of cities, the U.S. Open, a G8 Summit, numerous sporting events from soccer to golf, national political conventions, and two presidential inaugurations—one for Clinton's second term and more recently for Obama.

AirComm's clientele are corporate and as-directed work as well as the large events that take the staff across the world. The company specializes in logistics, which could be coordinating vehicles and personnel for a major sporting championship game or managing the transportation needs of eight executives flying in from eight different locations for a three-day road show with a dozen stops. AirComm works with some major corporations like General Electric, NBC, and NBC's new parent company, Comcast, but it also has contracts with MTV, Telemundo, financial firms, government agencies, and other internationally respected companies. Crockett has never been interested in retail.

AirComm isn't an ordinary network. The company doesn't own vehicles or hire chauffeurs. Through an affiliation with over 330 heavily vetted partner companies throughout the country and world, Crockett is able to serve his customers. By allowing the partner companies to worry about the day-to-day operations and the hassles that come with it, he is free to focus on centralized reservations and customer service. It doesn't matter that AirComm is based in Chicago because AirComm's "market" is actually many cities across the United States and around the world. He's been steadily building his network since opening his company in 1993.

The affiliate model is popular and commonplace today, but Crockett was about a decade ahead of the curve. The inspiration for AirComm came to Crockett during his frequent business trips in the '90s. As a buyer for women's clothing boutiques in Chicagoland, he was constantly using car service in cities like New York. He found that most of his interactions as a passenger were based on the recommendation of hotel concierges—who were more often motivated by a commission to suggest the service rather than the needs of the customer—or by tak-

AirComm: BUILDING a Network from the GROUND UP

BY SUSAN ROSE

ing a stab in the dark and using the phone book. "Neither of which gave the best quality for service," he says.

For most travelers, the veracity of a provider was measured by the size of the Yellow Pages ad or its position in the alphabetical listings. There were a handful of networks, like Carey and Music Express, and word-of-mouth advertising was powerful, but there really was no other way for a customer to know if he was getting a fair price other than to spend some time dialing. That's to say, there was no dependable way to determine quality until the traveler was pleasantly surprised or horribly burned.

Inspired by how the flower company, FTD, managed its network of florists—without owning a single store and while maintaining consistency from coast to coast—Crockett thought the limousine industry could benefit from the same type of operation. His idea was to link companies under one umbrella as a convenience for customers; quality, service, and expectations would be the same from market to market. This was 1992, however, when fax machines were the essential business tool, not iPads and iPhones. The Internet wasn't even mainstream.

From idea to fruition, and with the assistance of about 10 investors, Crockett estimates it took about 15 months to launch. Between 1992 and 1993, he selected 25 cities that would be the basis for the network, thus beginning the painstaking vetting process. "What I found was shocking. I learned that being the biggest in the region didn't necessarily mean that the company was the best," he says. He also discovered that there wasn't always truth in advertising. "There were companies that claimed to run dozens of cars but turned out to be a two-car operation based out of their living room."

Crockett was essentially looking for one primary and secondary company in each market, those that had staff chauffeurs (not independent contractors) and owned their own vehicles that were maintained and, preferably, stored in a garage. Those with diverse fleets to serve a wider variety of clients were more attractive to Crockett, but it was only one of many criteria. These companies would be contracted partners in the network, using a competitive fixed pricing structure and abiding by the company manual for standards of service when acting on behalf of AirComm, such as chauffeur attire, insurance minimums, and age of the fleet.

In some cases, he noticed that potential vendors were a bit gun-shy about the process when he first approached them. He says that many he encountered faced either slow- or no-pay situations from working with other networks. Still others were leery of dealing with the network because of past experience. Some had built up their fleets based on the consistent business that was fed to them as an affiliate, only for the network to turn around and open a location in the very same city, decimating the core of the affiliate's business.

"We wanted to run clean and be fair to our partner companies," he says. "We specified that we would be net 60 days and always meet it. I liked the concept of not owning fleet, and I still like the concept, so we spell out in our contract that we won't open an office in their market. That's not what I want to do. It's a respect that goes both ways."

He uses much of the same philosophy today. "What I didn't and still don't do is get involved in how the company operates or what vehicles they own," he says. "I may make suggestions based on what my customers are looking for, but they are not my com-

"AirComm's clientele are corporate and as-directed work as well as the large events that take the staff across the world."



At The Peninsula Hotel in downtown Chicago



Crockett (second from left) has extensive site visits, like this one before the 2012 Olympic Games in London

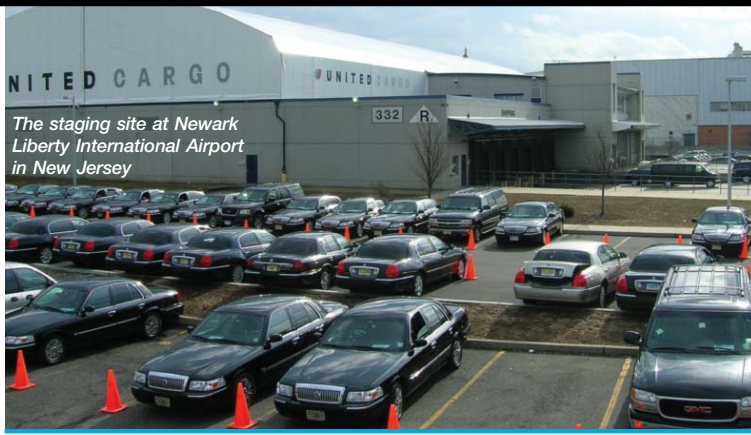


AirComm's home team (L to R): Debbie Binnendyk, Eilene Guamera, Tim Crockett, Vicki Singer, and Donna Crok

CROCKETT
BEGAN BIG
EVENT PLANNING
IN THE
1990s

panies. I want loyalty. It starts with a diverse fleet, where the company is located in proximity to an airport or other major venue, years of experience, insurance levels, and its reputation in the industry. Many of the companies that I selected then are still used now."

Several things happened in the first few years of business. First, the Internet exploded onto the scene, which made things considerably easier for AirComm. Crockett had initially set up the network by using dump terminals and printers



The staging site at Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey



AirComm handled the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver



Crockett "holds" up the world at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago

at each location for reservations, which were received via excruciatingly slow modems (the best technology at the time). E-mail replaced fax machines. Being current on the latest technology gave AirComm a leg up when the much faster Web was available.

Second, AirComm perfected its operating model. In the conceptual phase, Crockett envisioned that affiliates would feed each other trips, primarily airport work, but it didn't quite pan out the way he planned. By about 1995 he realized that he and his staff would have to secure the reservations and pass them to the affiliates. The third piece—event work—came in 1995 when he was contracted to run the U.S. World Cup.

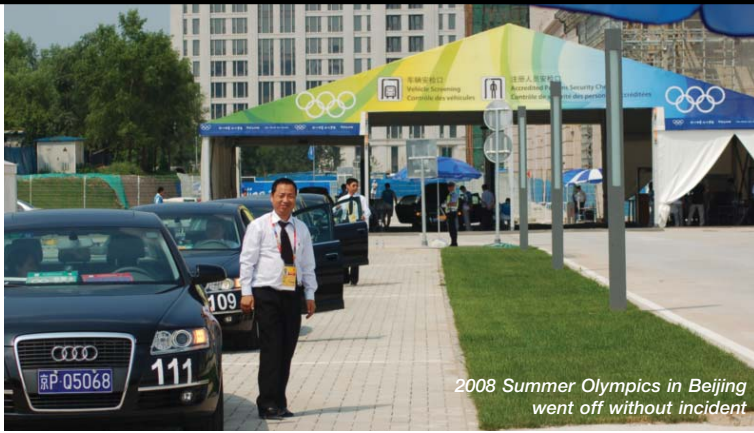
Crockett says his team of six—Gerald Blake, Andrew Ballard, Eduardo Amezcua, Debbie Binnendyk, Vicki Singer, and Eilene Guarnera—are all qualified to act on his behalf. He works with their strengths and tries to put them in the areas where they excel. Blake, whom he calls his right hand, has a travel schedule similar to Crockett and specializes in overall operations. Ballard, who is known as a fleet and chauffeur staging expert, and Amezcua, who has a tight control on airport operations, are also team leaders who frequently travel. In the office, Binnendyk handles all of the minutiae that it takes to keep vendors in check and up to date. Guarnera and Singer run the reservations and sales departments, respectively. When he needs extra staff, he calls on some trusted professionals with whom he has worked with for years. In the office he also relies on Renee Cantu, reservations specialist; Donna Crok, office assistant; and Carole Hoger, executive assistant to keep things running smoothly.

Crockett likes to eliminate the surprises before they become headaches, especially during large-scale events. Although it requires some thinking on the fly because the inevitable and unavoidable will always happen, but everything is taken into consideration and a contingency plan is devised.

Everyone in the know receives a copy of the playbook, and AirComm team leaders have iPads in the field that contain the latest playbook, documents, and greeting signs (to meet VIPs). They learn a little more with each event they handle.

All who are involved—AirComm staff, chauffeurs, meeting planners, and other personnel—get together and conduct a dry run a few days prior so everyone understands what is expected and all questions are answered. Things like the dress code, how to greet the VIP, and special instructions are all addressed. AirComm will even drill chauffeurs with flashcards so that they can identify the important people. Chauffeurs are paid for their time away from their regular work and are taken through the approved route to the venue. "Chauffeurs will say that they know how to get to the location, or that they have a faster route, but it's not about that," he says. "It's our jobs to make them understand why the approved route must be followed. Sometimes it's the route [mandated] by the city, but we are accountable for their location at all times as well as the people they are driving. Cars are labeled with numbers so that they are easily recognizable. We need to be able to backtrack if the car doesn't show up."

Crockett says that handling event work has had a snowball effect on AirComm. The meeting planner industry is very fluid and transient, so planners will move from company to company as needed. "If they



2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing went off without incident



▲ Gerald Blake, part of AirComm's traveling team, is pictured above (third from right) at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and below (middle) at an event in New Delhi, India ▼



Crockett with George Jacobs of Windy City Limousine in Chicago, one of AirComm's longtime partner companies



Vehicles are numbered so that they are easily recognizable to planners and guests



remember us doing a good job in the past, they will call on us again," he says. Crockett cut his teeth on international events in 2006 when he was contracted to do the Olympics in Torino, Italy. In 2011, he says that AirComm handled over 40 events all over the world. Right now he's working on plans for events in places as far away as India, Rio de Janeiro, and Munich, to name a few, but also many

"Through an affiliation with over 330 heavily vetted partner companies throughout the country and world, Crockett is able to serve his customers."

IT STARTS WITH A DIVERSE FLEET, WHERE THE COMPANY IS LOCATED IN PROXIMITY TO AN AIRPORT OR OTHER MAJOR VENUE

more in the United States.

There is one thing he'd like to change about working with meeting planners: the continued trend to push for concessions on transportation prices. He says that as long as operators are willing to slash prices below profitability, the quality will suffer and the "luxury" component will decline until it's on par with taxi service. "If everyone would stand their ground and not drive prices down, we'd get a higher rate across the board and differentiate ourselves from the taxi companies but few are willing to step up," he says. He understands that he's in a unique position and not everyone would feel comfortable rocking the boat when the recovery is still fragile.

Crockett is passionate about quality service, and he knows that it starts with the chauffeurs. His travels to London have opened his eyes to how differently the profession of chauffeuring is regarded here and across

the Atlantic. "In London, chauffeurs are proud to be a professional and they take their jobs very seriously," he says. "They will train for years to be the best chauffeur that they can be. It's their vocation. What you'll sometimes get in America are disgruntled drivers who may have started their lives in a different occupation and fell into driving because they can't do what they want to do." If he had his way, Crockett would elevate the profession to the level that it deserves, starting with owners' attitudes toward their staff. There's a big difference between a 'driver' and a 'chauffeur.' If you want them to look the part, give them the tools and encourage them to be the best they can be. Give them the proper training, treat them well, and pay them fairly for their service."

As part of the contract with AirComm, there is a list of standards that all chauffeurs are expected to meet when handling AirComm customers. This is especially true during the large events. Crockett says that he'll get very specific in the playbook about the protocol for situations that aren't part of a chauffeur's everyday experience, like driving on a tarmac (never back up and a chauffeur should not exit the vehicle) and meeting customers at a private plane. "I find that when we give them this information and treat them well that they want to do a good job for us and will take pride in their work. Treat them like human beings."

Crockett has had the experience of running a net-

work for almost 20 years now, and he's learned through trial and error what not to do. As the industry transitions more and more into an affiliate model, he has some concerns with the "global network provider" moniker that many have adopted. "Everyone thinks they can run a network and be properly covered until there's a problem," he says. "You know, you can't just pick an affiliate out of a book and expect that they're going to be a quality service. We're not going to say that we're in 450 cities across the globe to make us sound bigger than we are. We do have all the major cities covered, but in the rare case that a customer is asking to book service in an area where we don't have a contracted vendor, we won't accept it. We'll possibly recommend a company, but it won't be booked through us. We haven't done our due diligence with this company, so we won't take the chance."

He says companies that aren't taking the time to do it properly and to vet their affiliates are opening themselves up to liability should something happen. "Some of these companies aren't using contracts," he says. "Do they have the affiliate's insurance certificates on file? Do they understand that their policy won't cover outbound jobs? Do they have a contract that says that affiliates have to maintain that level of insurance? If you're going to be in this, be in it 100 percent and do what is required so that your passengers and your company are protected."

Crockett, with the assistance of Binnendyk, regularly polices his affiliates with ghost rides and surprise facility visits so

"He traveled over 180 days in 2011 and is on track to put in about the same number of days this year."

When not working, Crockett and his wife Vicki enjoy sailing on their boat



HIS FAMILY WILL OFTEN TRY TO MEET HIM AT THE END OF AN EVENT

Crockett's office is based in Chicago, but events take him around the world



like the Ryder Cup scheduled for September (thankfully a little closer to home in Illinois), he's got his hands full.

He knows that traveling to many different time zones and working several 20-hour days in a row take a toll on his body. "It's always family first," he says. "There are times when I miss things with them, but I try to schedule myself around theirs." Crockett is behind the scenes, and it's

that he is sure they are maintaining the level of service that his customers expect. He mandates that companies cannot subcontract work for his customers. "I love ghost rides because we can ask a regular customer to do it. I'll comp the ride in exchange for a questionnaire to be completed. They already know what to expect. I've found that most customers will be brutally honest so I get a good snapshot of what's happening." Binnendyk ensures that vendors have the required insurance minimums and that all the other paperwork is in order, including the up-to-the-minute fleet information.

Two years ago, Crockett bought out his investors and became the sole owner of the company. He's always had an active role, but his focus is on operations, budgeting and forecasting, and logistics. He enjoys working with meeting planners on the ground and writing playbooks. He traveled over 180 days in 2011 and is on track to put in about the same number of days this year. With the London Olympics just around the corner and other events

not often that he will actually get to see the event that is taking place. Asking for tickets is taboo, but sometimes he's able to use those that would otherwise be wasted. "My son is dying to go to the Super Bowl, so we'll work it out that he can come."

His wife Vicki and kids Preston, 9, and Maddie, 12, will often try to meet him at the end of an event so that the family can take a little time to themselves. It's a great way for his family to share in his success and an opportunity for him to unwind after the intensity of the schedule. As a family, their favorite activities are sailing and skiing, which they do as often as possible. While covering the Olympics in Torino, Italy, a few years ago, Crockett was able to sample the local vino—one of the great memories for the wine aficionado. During the Beijing Olympics, he says he saw the beautiful countryside, including The Great Wall of China. Later this year, he hopes that his family will join him after the event in Munich so that they can experience some amazing skiing. There are definitely a few perks. **LD**