



25 YEARS AND COUNTING:

Jim Bolinger outside Westwind's office in Dayton, Ohio

Westwind Limousine Celebrates Its Successes in Sales, Service, and Manufacturing

By Liz Hunter

As *Limousine Digest* celebrates its 19th anniversary, we can't help but get a little nostalgic for the early days. When the idea of launching a magazine for the limousine and chauffeured transportation industry developed between cofounders Ric Cohen and Eric Alpert, they didn't have to look very far to find their first supporter thanks to Jim Bolinger of Westwind Limousine.

As the magazine began developing into a physical product, Bolinger immediately agreed to be an advertiser and signed up for the inside front cover. He says it was amazing to witness the foundation of the publication and to see it flourishing to this day. "I've always had a nothing-but-stellar relationship with *Limousine Digest* from day one, and it still holds true to this day," says Bolinger. And that means a lot coming from him.

Bolinger's first limousine: a 1965 Cadillac factory formal in 1978



Westwind's first official limousine: a 1981 Cadillac



Bolinger is no spring chicken. If it happened in the industry, he was there to see it firsthand. He joined the limousine industry in the late '70s as a hobby, running a 1965 Cadillac factory formal that he bought for \$700. Then he officially formed West-

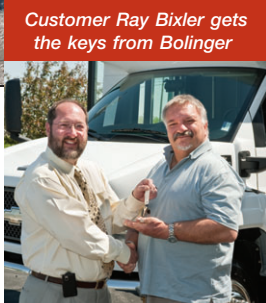
wind Limousine in 1984, which is also celebrating an anniversary—its 25th. Based in Ohio, Westwind grew quickly. After 2 years, Bolinger moved the service out of his home and into a commercial facility and began refurbishing and selling used limousines. "Back then you couldn't find used limousines anywhere," says Bolinger, who managed a Chevy dealership prior to opening Westwind. "If you did find any, they needed a lot of work." So Westwind got into the sales end to replenish the vehicles he needed for his rental fleet.



Westwind staff L to R: Judi Bolinger, Jim Bolinger, Tom Jones, Colleen Cook, and Rob Decker



Tom Jones in the plant



Customer Ray Bixler gets the keys from Bolinger



26-passenger Westwind limobus interior



Westwind Coachworks limobus inventory



Westwind Limousine's vehicle garage



26-passenger Westwind limobus interior

Photos courtesy of Biel Photographic

Bolinger estimates that Westwind has sold more than 8,000 used vehicles worldwide since he began. "We've never been the one to sell a used vehicle as is," says Bolinger. "We've got full-time mechanics on staff to refinish the vehicles. When we sell them every lightbulb works and the AC blows cold. I think that's what sets us apart from other used dealers who don't have the capabilities or facility to check every detail of a vehicle before selling it."

Over the years, selling used limousines became the bread and butter for Westwind. Bolinger says it was a natural evolution to progress from the limousine service to limousine sales, and eventually to limousine manufacturing. Bolinger's company delved into the manufacturing side in 1996 when it partnered with the Murgel family of Marshfield, Missouri. Westwind Coachworks started with traditional Hummers and stretch limousines, until 2006 when it launched its limobus line. "That's the way the industry is shifting, from limousines to buses," Bolinger says. "Wedding parties are getting bigger, corporate executives don't want to be seen in a Hummer, and buses are discreet

but available with all of the same amenities as a limousine." Out of its 20,000-square-foot facility in Dayton, Ohio, Westwind builds 18- to 38-passenger buses on Ford, Chevy, or International chassis. Bolinger stands by his product as "the most affordable limobus line in the industry."

He says he has put 25 years worth of pet peeves as an

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operator into Westwind's bus line, beginning with his biggest and most commonly heard complaint: air conditioning. "I don't want to hear a client saying she's too hot in the back of my bus, and I know the operators who buy from me don't want to hear it either," says Bolinger. "So we doubled the recommended AC capacity in our buses—leaning more toward a meat locker than a sauna." Bolinger says another pet peeve is providing cup holders in his buses. "Give a guy a place to put his beverage and



sions of the company, as well as maintaining the website. Rob Decker, sales manager, has been with Westwind for 15 years. "He has a lot of clients who come to him repeatedly for different products," says Bolinger. "He is personable, knowledgeable, and familiar with vehicles from any coachbuilder."

Service Manager Tom Jones has 17 years with the company. He's the go-to guy for maintenance of Westwind's vehicles. "He can fix any limousine," says Bolinger. "He's got a great repair sense and he knows how to trouble shoot a problem to get it resale-ready and functional." On the manufacturing end, Bolinger turns to Kevin Murgel—son of one of coachbuilding's forefathers, Bob Murgel—for designing new vehicles. "The relationship we began with his family is still strong. I can go to Kevin with any new design

then he won't set it on the floor only to end up spilling."

Westwind's clients are responding to Bolinger's experience as an operator when it comes to choosing which vehicle to add to their fleets. "They appreciate the fact that I've been in their shoes and their ideas are my ideas," he says. "I know that downtime is money. When a customer needs a part, I don't ship it ground, I overnight it. We address issues head on, professionally and ethically."

Over the years, Bolinger has stepped clearly into the spotlight as Westwind's representative for sales and manufacturing, but relies on his management team to handle various aspects of the business. Bolinger's wife, Judi, has been with Westwind for 3 years, and she is responsible for marketing and advertising all divi-

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— Jim Bolinger

plan and know his creativity will come through," says Bolinger.

Bolinger wears many hats for Westwind, but it's a balancing act he's grown accustomed to over 25 years. "I love my job and I have met so many great people and developed friendships over the years that I wouldn't trade," he says. "I don't know what else I would do if I weren't in the limousine industry." And who knows where the industry would be without him. **LD**