

Tailor-made Transport

COBUS Industries doesn't just sell a product; it offers a complete transport solution.

Images by Sabrina Feige

A well-known brand in most modern airports, COBUS Industries prides itself on offering a high-quality product and service. It is the only company in the world that is dedicated exclusively to the construction of airport buses and this has inevitably secured its place in such a niche market.

The idea to provide shuttle buses to transfer travellers between terminals, to the baggage claim area, and from plane to terminal was first conceived in 1978 at Zurich Airport. Although at the time COBUS Industries was not known under its current name, it

still bore all of the brand's most important hallmarks.

Since then, COBUS Industries has expanded to include a number of vehicle models which operate all over the world. There are roughly 3,000 COBUS vehicles in operation at 350 airports in Europe, America, Asia, the Middle East, and beyond.

The COBUS Industries airport people-moving buses are crafted to support the function of moving large groups of airline passengers over relatively short distances. With this objective in mind, certain unique features have been incorporated into the design.

These include extra-large passenger doors permitting two people to pass through at the same time, multiple sets of doors providing rapid unloading and loading times, doors on both sides of the bus to eliminate the need for the driver to pull up next to the curb, a kneeling feature to bring the step-in height down to less than 28 centimetres, and a specialised exhaust system.

The COBUS Industries group offers a tailor-made solution for every specific transport requirement. Its flagship vehicle is the COBUS 3000, which is distinguished by its efficient fleet management, short turn-around, >



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mobility, efficiency, and life span of more than 25 years. It can hold up to 112 passengers, which is about double the number of a normal city transit bus. Other models include the COBUS 2700, COBUS 2700-S, and the COBUS 2500, which are all designed to meet specific and individual requirements.

Patricia Vasconcelos has been leading the COBUS Industries team for a couple of years. She studied economics in Germany, has a Master of Business Administration, and has a strong background in finance. She initially joined COBUS Industries as CFO at the beginning of a complicated and hard restructuring process, before a decision was made by the shareholders to promote her to the role of CEO.

"As we were right in the middle of a deep restructuring phase my finance background was a very

important aspect in leading and getting the company back to success," Patricia says. "We had clear objectives and measures to be implemented in order to get the company back to sustainability and growth figures. Both of these things were of course led by strict financial objectives, so my vision and knowledge about the financial situation were crucial to be able to make things happen and adapt to the needs of the company in order to grow.

"We had to develop a new strategy for the whole company—a commercial strategy and a vision strategy—but always keeping in mind the impact this would have on the financials of the company."

Patricia believes her background in finance equipped her with the knowledge she needed to be able to effectively negotiate pricing, conditions, payment, and audits. "It was easy for me because of

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my financial background," she says. "I knew exactly all of the impacts each element would have on the company, and this was very important."

Patricia's leadership style is somewhat influenced by her German and Portuguese heritage. "From the German side I am very target oriented," she explains. "I push the team for the target—not only for today's target but also for tomorrow's target and for the targets of the future.

"From the Portuguese side, I got flexibility. As we are in a market that is different from region to region, there has to be some flexibility in order to grow according to the different requirements of every type of culture in this world. I have a lot of flexibility, which is more the Portuguese way."

COBUS Industries differentiates itself from its competitors by ensuring it always offers a product which is of a high standard. It also makes an effort to provide the best services to the customer it possibly can. "We are very involved with our customers," Patricia says. "We don't only sell them a product; we sell them a solution. We are always there to help them find the best way to use our product; the best solution for them.

"We have a very good quality product because we only choose the best materials, state-of-the-art development and production knowledge, and provide an excellent service. This is all thanks to our staff. I think this is the big difference between us and our competitors. We aren't just selling a product. We sell the product and all the needed services around that product." >

"A great teamwork between the specialists that all contribute to the success of COBUS. A unique spirit between companies in different countries that are complementary to each other." - Alex Naef, CEO, Carrosserie HESS AG



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COBUS Industries has been recognised as a market leader in the airport transfer industry since 1990. To stay in this position, Patricia acknowledges the need for innovation. “As market leaders, we have to be the frontrunner in new technologies. An example is the launch of an electric airport bus, which has already been developed and is now being tested in Europe.

“We can’t wait until the competition comes into front view and then follow what they are doing. No, our strategy is to make sure that we are the first ones in the market with a new product. As a market leader we are always looking to the preference of the customer in order to make sure our product is the best for them, for their requirements and needs.”

COBUS Industries makes an effort to adapt to its customers and their businesses. “We want to help them fit into the new way the world is moving,” Patricia says. “The competition is very hard and our customers’ margins are very tight, so if we don’t have these people as partners working with us every day, then we will not succeed. Our aim is to ensure a long-term success with our partners. We know their constraints, we know their problems, their challenges, and we will always try adapt to them. We provide them with the best solution in order to contribute to their good business results. Customer orientation is our major concern.”

Having long-term relationships with key suppliers is also important in COBUS Industries’ corporate strategy. “All of the information we get from the market we share with our key suppliers. We have direct communication to each supplier and person. We share the information we get from the market with our strategic suppliers so that they know what is happening and vice versa. It is also

“We have a long partnership with COBUS and see them as extremely well-managed. It took a while until mutual trust reached today’s level and our efforts were increasingly rewarded by COBUS. A great partnership, thank you COBUS.” - Mr Wolters, General Manager, Eberspächer Sutrak GmbH & Co. KG

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crucial to have our suppliers sharing their product innovations with us, so essentially both parties benefit from this set-up. It’s a win-win situation.

“We openly discuss our problems and challenges with our suppliers. We have open discussions, even if things are not going as well as we would like them to be. It is an open and honest discussion in order to get the best out of it. We will never try to hide or try to avoid telling them about important

market trends and innovations. They are experts in their development and product specifications. Better than anybody else, they know how to help us adapt to our customer needs.

“A premium product requires a constant improvement in product features and an up-to-date technology. It is of utmost importance to have our suppliers involved in our market requirements so that they can quickly and proactively >



help us to achieve what we need. This share of information and mutual knowledge is only possible due to the strong and long-term relationship we have with them. We are talking about a few key suppliers that we consider to be part of our success.

“Furthermore, and due to this extended relationship, we also know what we may or may not require from our key suppliers. You can only share information when you know that you have somebody who can really take care of your supply chain on the other side.”

While looking after the customer and the supplier is important, COBUS Industries also puts a focus on taking care of its own employees. Patricia says her team is “absolutely the most important thing” in the success of the business. “It is only with our people that we can make the things we have in mind and implement the strategies we define.

“I really think very highly of my team. They are the ones that are out there on the floor all the time, facing customers’ problems and sharing customer satisfaction. They are the ones who have ‘life’ contact to the end-user; they know exactly what the customer needs and wants. There is certainly a big focus which we put on supporting our team. We run a lot of workshops and try to schedule brainstorming meetings in order to have everyone come together for a discussion.

“We define our strategic goals together and nothing is done without involving the responsible departments. Alignment with company values and strategic goals is of utmost importance. We ensure we have people around us from the buying side and people around us from the customer side. On the customer side, apart from the decision-makers, we also hear from people who are working out on the floor—the people that work every day with our buses.”

“We even try to talk to the passengers that ride on our buses, to the people in the workshops that are working on the maintenance of our buses, and to the drivers that are driving our buses each day to get their feedback. We really do try to give everyone what they really need.”

Over the next few years, COBUS Industries will focus on its growth as it works to further penetrate the airport transport market. A strategy for the next two to five years has been developed, which will focus on its products and services in Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world.

“Our growth strategy is not to develop one solution for the whole world. That is just not possible. Although we have ‘only’ one product, it has differences to make it suitable for a variety of markets all over the globe. Each region has its own requests and demands—the product and service awareness differs from country to

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country. Every region needs its own market development and penetration strategy.”

A special project which is currently in the development and testing stage is the electric airport bus, which will first be released in 2015 in the European market. COBUS Industries has been working with its suppliers and strong customer base to gather as much information as possible before it is launched.

“We really want to know what our customers require and how long they are driving on a daily basis in order to be able to offer the best option we possibly can for them,” Patricia says.

Another project currently on COBUS Industries’ agenda is to develop a product variant targeting Asian countries. This new variant still adheres to the brand’s high standard of quality, adapting product features and functionality to local market requirements.

“These customers in the Asian markets have a different service and price awareness,” Patricia says. “They have a different value proposition and we need to address it. We are working with them in order to give them a product which is going to be suitable for them.”

Patricia notes that every region which COBUS Industries has entered requires a different stance and approach. “We have Europe where the focus is going to be electric buses, we have Asia where the focus is going to lie on the new product variant, we have the Middle East where the focus is our premium product, and we have South America where the approach has to go through local partnerships or JV.

“It’s not like we can have one product for the entire world. We have one product/solution with different specifications and characteristics for the different parts of the world. Otherwise, you can’t grow in this market because of the cultural differences—the awareness of quality, price, and



product in the different regions of the world. As a global supplier we have to adapt to those differences in the regions.”

The core philosophy of COBUS Industries is to provide a ‘safe solution’ for passengers travelling from the plane to the terminal. The company understands that airplanes can only earn money when they are actually in the air and with this in mind it works to reduce the length of time it takes passengers to get from one point to another.

COBUS Industries considers economic factors such as capacity, fuel consumption, and maintenance. One COBUS 3000 vehicle can carry more than twice the number of passengers that a city bus can and this in turn results in multiple advantages. These include smaller bus fleets, lower investments, a 50-per-cent reduction in personnel costs, and a greater degree of flexibility.

Less than five litres of diesel fuel is required per operating hour to run a COBUS Industries vehicle and the entire engine is designed specifically for airport operations. This ensures optimal performance under all driving conditions. Compared to traditional city buses, fuel consumption is two-thirds less with potential savings of up to 25,000 gallons and 95,000 litres of diesel fuel per year.

Furthermore, simple maintenance procedures are in place to reduce the down time of vehicles. Any necessary repairs can be done directly on or in the vehicle without the need to transport it off site to a workshop.

COBUS Industries has a bright future ahead under the direction of Patricia. She will continue to guide it as it expands its presence in the global marketplace by offering a complete transport solution, rather than simply a product. ●

