

Part One:

Bob Gilbert (00:08):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and their Tales, a podcast series that invites travel and tourism leaders and influencers to share their take on key industry issues. My name is Bob Gilbert and I'm the general manager for the tourism and destination marketing practice at the award-winning strategic marketing agency, Eddy Alexander. My career spans over three decades in the travel and tourism industry where I've had the privilege of working with iconic brands and so many amazing colleagues who in their own ways are pushing the industry forward and using tourism to increase understanding, access and quality of life. For those who work in travel, those that love to travel, and the communities that benefit from travel, I'll be bringing you into the conversation with top professionals who are shaping the industry, all with their unique tales and perspectives that they're ready to share with you. Welcome to another freshly brewed edition of Tourism Heads and Their Tales.

Bob Gilbert (01:07):

Brought to you by the award-winning agency Eddy Alexander. Today's podcast features an industry icon, Pete Pantuso, so president and CEO of the American Bus Association, more commonly known as ABA. He also serves as president of the National Bus Traffic Association and the ABA Foundation. ABA is North America's leading and largest motor coach tour and travel association representing over 70% of all motor coaches on the road, and also includes a \$10 million foundation that provides research to the industry and has awarded over a million dollars in scholarships since its inception. Pete also serves as an appointee to the US Department of Transportation's Motor Carrier Safety Advisory Council and served as a member of the National Advisory Committee on Travel and Tourism Infrastructure. He holds a master's degree from George Washington University School of Business and Government. So welcome and good morning, Pete.

Peter Pantuso (02:14):

Hello Bob. Great to be with you. Thank you for including me today.

Bob Gilbert (02:17):

Well, thank you for joining us. So the first question that I kick off with everybody is to share your career journey with our audience on how you became president and CEO of American Bus Association, a role that I think you've held now for 27 years.

Peter Pantuso (02:36):

You're right, it's been 27 years. I'm not sure we've got enough time for the whole journey, but I'll try to connect it. So I started my very early career working in the Pennsylvania legislature. Went from there to be a lobbyist for a glass company, and then came to Washington DC in 1980 with a glass trade association. And during that time fell in love with trade associations and how they work and how they function. So after my time at the glass trade association, I went to a candy and chocolate association, then to a rubber tire association and then read a little want ad in the back of the Washington Post in 1996 where this association was looking for someone to run it and be their CEO. And I applied and I don't know how I ended up with the job, but I'm grateful and blessed every single day that I'm here.

Bob Gilbert (03:26):

Wow. 27 years ago, and I think it's pretty well known that you are retiring next year, so you'll be spending a little bit more time on your motorbike.

Peter Pantuso (03:35):

Well, that's one of the hopes. Yeah, September of 24 is my official retirement date or if they find somebody before that. And so it may be a little bit earlier, but you're right, there are a number of criteria that I have in the back of my mind of leaving in the timing. And number one was for people that knew my predecessor gentleman by the name of George Snyder, he actually passed away doing the job and that was one of the first criteria for making a decision to leave when I leave, wanted to go when I'm still healthy. And there are a lot of things that I'm interested in doing on a personal level. I want to spend a little more time at my farm, a little more time on my motorcycle and a little more time playing music. And you know, I've got some other business interests that I'm involved in and I hope to spend more time with those as well.

Bob Gilbert (04:19):

Yeah, that's fantastic. You know, I do remember George and I think I was in Orlando when he passed.

Peter Pantuso (04:24):

Exactly. That's exactly where it was.

Bob Gilbert (04:26):

It was at the Clarion Hotel and he was Falls Church. I don't know if he was the mayor or

Peter Pantuso (04:31):

Yeah, he was mayor of Falls Church Virginia, very well known in the Washington DC area and came through the bus industry. I can't remember if he was at Greyhound or Trailways, maybe both at different times. But he was an icon in the industry. He truly was an icon in the transportation industry. And I was blessed by the fact that, you know, he came to the association when it was literally broke and built it back up to a point where it was on solid ground and solid footing. It gave me the opportunity to hopefully take it to the next level. And you know, my hope is when I leave here that the next person that comes in will be able to move it even to a higher level and be even more successful with it.

Bob Gilbert (05:12):

So in terms of history and looking back, if I'm not mistaken, ABAs 97 year history, which I believe is being celebrated this year.

Peter Pantuso (05:23):

Yeah.

Bob Gilbert (05:23):

Started as a motor coach division of AAA back in 1926, is my fact check correct?

Peter Pantuso (05:30):

You're absolutely right. We were a little division within AAA and then broke out of that at some point. I don't remember the exact year, but

Bob Gilbert (05:38):

Right.

Peter Pantuso (05:38):

We became an independent group of motor coach owners and operators, and I would have to say, this goes back probably 45 years. The leadership and the association at that time decided that we wanted to expand our footprint and not just be a bus association, but get more involved in the group travel side of the business. And that's when we started our marketplace and started attracting people who were not just motor coach operators, but destinations, hotels, restaurants, and all the above that want to see and handle group business.

Bob Gilbert (06:10):

Right. So explain to our audience the importance of group travel in the travel and tourism industry.

Peter Pantuso (06:18):

So it's a, it's a number of things Bob, and I think at ABA, you know, the way I describe it to people is that we are the full ecosystem of group travel because we're not just motor coaches, we're places where people want to go stay, see things and do things. And the advantage of group travel, and there's a number of advantages. Number one, you take people to see things and do things that they might not otherwise have the opportunity to do. Think of my parents who in their era had a lot opportunity to do things but not maybe travel as much as they wanted to. And by traveling by bus and as groups, they were able to, you know, go to the Grand Canyon, they were able to go and see the Rose Bowl parade and do some of the things that they wouldn't have thought of doing necessarily on their own or that they wouldn't have done as a family. And the other benefit of group travel to in particular the members, is that it gives an opportunity to fill in those kind of dead spots, if you will. You know, hotels can price their product and use the groups to fill in those times when maybe they don't have convention business or it's not peak tourism season, or those other opportunities when they need and want the business and can provide opportunities for the group to do some of the things that they might have otherwise done in peak season, but do it maybe at a better rate.

Bob Gilbert (07:36):

So as ABA has grown over the years, I think now you have almost 4,000 members in different categories.

Peter Pantuso (07:44):

Yes. Very close to that. We're a little below that now. We've lost a number of members during Covid.

Bob Gilbert (07:49):

Yeah.

Peter Pantuso (07:49):

But they're coming back and we lost a lot of motor coach companies in the industry, but thank goodness at ABA, most of the companies that unfortunately went out of business were not ABA members. So our motor coach segment held very strong and most of the rest of the industry that belonged to ABA stayed. And they saw the larger vision of listen business coming back and we need to be prepared. But we saw, as you well know, a lot of turnover in the industry, new people coming into the industry.

Bob Gilbert (08:18):

Yep.

Peter Pantuso (08:18):

And some of the veterans who had been at various spots who were representatives from their companies to ABA, you know, departed for any number of reasons. And so now we have to resell ourselves to an entirely new audience, which we've done very effectively over the last few years.

Bob Gilbert (08:34):

Now, do you still have four membership levels or categories? Is that right? Like you've got your motor coach operators, tour operators, industry membership, and on the supply side as well, right?

Peter Pantuso (08:45):

That's right. That's exactly right. Yeah, four basic categories,

Bob Gilbert (08:48):

Which is the largest of the four.

Peter Pantuso (08:51):

The largest would be the travel category. You know, they represent by far the most of our membership. And then second largest would be the motor coach companies specifically. So we've, in round numbers, we've got about 850 motor coach companies. We have about another 400 tour companies, a couple thousand travel industry members, and then, a few hundred suppliers, mostly business suppliers or suppliers to the motor coach side specifically. So they could be buses and tires and parts, et cetera. So like you said earlier, it's a little shy of 4,000 right now.

Bob Gilbert (09:26):

That's an impressive number for sure. You know, we, we've been talking a lot about numbers in one way or another. So I mean, I don't know of any other travel industry association leader with such a long tenure that you have with, you know, 27 years now over that time you've seen a lot of changes that have impacted your members, but we learned from road bumps, no pun intended. And you touched on it a little, but how has the motor coach business fared post covid and can you describe some of the tax relief programs, particularly CERTS, which is C-E-R-T-S, Coronavirus Economic Relief for Transportation Services. What is the status of that and how impactful has that been in recovery?

Peter Pantuso (10:14):

Yeah, great question. So as you remember, really back in 2020, when we were in the midst of Covid, Congress was trying to figure out, you know, how do we stabilize the economy and different segments of the economy? And there were PPP loans that were available to businesses and there were grants and loans that had to be repaid back, unlike PPP that people could borrow to low interest rates, EIDL loans. There were very few number of industries, restaurants and particular theater venues in particular airlines transit systems that got dedicated funding to keep their segment of the industry and the economy alive. And we at the same time got in the middle and said, listen, we need to help the motor coach industry. They have a large capital investment, they have large loans out on this equipment, they

have a lot of employees, and if we're to keep the group travel and group tour industry alive down the road, we need to get them some assistance.

Peter Pantuso (11:11):

So as you pointed out, we created the CERTS program and we were able to move it through Congress. We didn't get as much money as we thought we needed given how hard the industry had been hit. But at the end of the day, there was a \$2 billion program, about a billion of that went to the motor coach industry. The rest of it went to the school bus industry and the passenger vessel industry, which not cruise ships, but you know, the smaller passenger vessels, steam ships and paddle wheels and others that many of whom are also members of ABA. Unfortunately, that program, unlike a lot of the other direct programs, was taxable. And so we've been working over the last couple of years to see if we can't claw back some of that tax for the industry challenging Congress is that you usually need other legislation to attach something to, and there really hasn't been a tax bill that we could attach change that we want to in Congress. And, and the longer Congress goes on and somewhat dysfunctional as it appears to be today, you know, the likelihood of getting that tax relief probably is slipping away.

Bob Gilbert (12:18):

So in terms of recovery, if I was in the airline industry, you know, one of the metrics would be how many new aircraft have been ordered that shows some resilience and looks at the future? What would be the corresponding metric within the motor coach industry? How many new buses have been ordered? I mean, if you're an operator, I'm not sure what the percentage is of people that buy their own bus versus lease. I would have to think that lease would be up there. But the common denominator would be how many new buses are coming out of the manufacturing plants?

Peter Pantuso (12:54):

Great question. So the, the metrics, you know, that we look at, we look at a couple of different things. We have an economist that does workforce as part of the ABA foundation and kind of put it in perspective, just motor coach revenue by itself. Not group tour revenue, but just motor coach revenue. Prior to Covid in 2019, for example, it was about 15 and a half billion dollars. In 2020 it went down to about 3 billion. So it went down to by about 90% it became to come back obviously a little bit in 21, 22, 23. We're in the process right now of doing a census of the industry to see what their revenue and their passenger ridership looks like. We'll have better sense for that in the next couple of months when that data comes out. But we know that when I look at the different segments of the industry today, and again just motor coach in particular are basically three segments.

Peter Pantuso (13:47):

There's the commuter segment, which really had taken it on the chin and still struggles a bit because people aren't back in their office every day. So those commuter companies that were bringing people into New York or Washington or some of the other major metropolitan areas around the country still operating at about 50% capacity. The other segment, the second segment of the industry is the scheduled service portion. And that would be, you know, Greyhound or Megabus. Those companies that are going from city to city or rural communities to more popular areas, they seem to be operating at about 75% capacity. So they've come back quite a bit. The charter and tour segment is the real home run in the industry for a couple of reasons. Number one, because people are traveling again, number two, because we did lose so many companies, so many motor coach companies, we lost about a quarter to a third of the industry.

Peter Pantuso (14:37):

And so that supply and demand curve is very much in favor of the motor coach companies now. And virtually every company I talk to is at full capacity right now. Either full capacity because they're so busy or in some cases because there's a lack of drivers out there. But that segment has recovered, I wouldn't say fully, but pretty close to fully, maybe not in terms of total numbers when you think about the shrinking industry, but in terms of where the companies were pre-Covid, a lot of them are doing even better now than they did back then. So we look at those metrics when we look at motor coach sales, which would be more equivalent to airline sales. You know, we were getting round numbers about 2000 or 2,500 coaches back in the day, 17, 18, 19. And then, you know, it dropped down literally to a handful of coaches in 21. Yeah,

Bob Gilbert (15:26):

Yeah

Peter Pantuso (15:26):

Some of the deliveries already took place in early 20, and then over the last couple years we're now back to about 1100 or 1200 coaches. And that's something that we track on a quarterly basis as well.

Bob Gilbert (15:38):

You know, you mentioned that probably the most vibrant and well-known activity of ABA is Marketplace. And you know, many industry groups such as destinations, my old guys in the the hotel industry attractions love marketplace. It was in fact my first introduction to ABA back in the eighties when I was at Choice Hotels. It was a must attend event on the industry calendar. You know, for my salespeople in the and our franchise hotels, it was a very well coordinated, complex operation that took months of planning to make sure that, you know, we benefit from, you know, that buyer seller marketplace environment. How has marketplace evolved over the years and more recently as everybody's clawing back out of the pandemic?

Peter Pantuso (16:29):

So it evolved in a couple of ways. Number one, I appreciate the credit that you give it back in the eighties, that it was a must attend event. I'm not quite sure it was a must attend event back there. I think probably NTA and maybe a couple other shows were the ones you really had to go to if you wanted a market. We were kind of a small struggling show. And I remember seeing the show after having gone to NTA when I first started here and then seeing the marketplace. And I thought when I reported back to the board and they said, what do you think? And I said, we need to get out of the show business. We don't belong in it, or we need to figure out a way to make it work much better than it has been because we only had maybe five or 600 attendees back in 96 when I came on board.

Peter Pantuso (17:06):

And it's evolved over the years in a number of ways. Number one, it's obviously grown. You know, we get around 3000 people, sometimes a little more at the shows. There's one coming up in January, January 13th through the 16th in Nashville. I think we'll probably be one of the bigger ones we've had because in part, everybody wants to be at Marketplace now, and it is now the must attend show and everybody loves Nashville. So that combination I think is a winning combination. But we added a lot more education, we added a lot more value. We found ways to bring other groups in to participate, whether it was state organizations or other travel groups, other associations. For example, Trailways

annual organization is meeting along at the same time that we are in Nashville this coming year. In other years the International Motor Coach Group meets with us and other organizations have met at the same time that we are there.

Peter Pantuso (17:59):

So that's changed. We brought together our safety and maintenance program to meet at the same time. So those bus and motor coach operators and their staff who may not be involved directly in the tour business, but are obviously very interested in learning how to better operate their companies from a safety and maintenance perspective and operational perspective, we've given them a reason to come as well. Beyond that, we have a number of councils that participate and meet while we're in Nashville, for example. And one would be women in buses, which is one of our model councils. We just created a new leadership council, which is kind of that next generation of leader coming along. We have our African American council, our Hispanic council, they all meet at the same time. And so it really has now become a gathering place for the industry, but it still is an event that feels very comfortable, even though we've grown, we wanted to make sure it's someplace that people feel like they're welcome and that everybody is welcome at the table. And, it still has that, you know, kind of small feel to it while it's gotten much, much bigger. I'm glad we've been able to preserve that portion of it.

Bob Gilbert (19:06):

So you have a whole bunch of industry partners, I don't know, 20 maybe, I'm not sure. I haven't done the count, but you know, some of them, one would think compete perhaps with certain aspects of your membership. How do you engage with, you know, those other industry partners that you list?

Peter Pantuso (19:28):

You know, I would define us all as kind of friendly competitors at the end of the day, right? Because we all are in the business of trying to grow and expand our respective organizations and bring, you know, the best to the table that we can and, and the most comprehensive, you know, numbers of people to the table that we can. But we all have the same vision and purpose at the end of the day. And it's serving our members and anybody in particular in Washington, but anybody in this business learns pretty quickly that you can't do it all by yourself.

Bob Gilbert (19:59):

Right.

Peter Pantuso (19:59):

The biggest companies in the world can't operate without help from others who are most of the time are their competitors. So whether it's retail, whether it's automotive, whatever it might be, and motor coaching group tour is no different. We've got to be able to work side by side with those people who might be our competitors one day or another. And we often find ourselves, you know, supporting one another, including each other in meetings. A more recent example, we've been doing a lot of work with the National Park Service, looking at their future plans for instituting fees on groups coming in. And it's been us and the National Tour Association and the, International Motor Coach group, individual tour operators. Sometimes SIDA has been involved in those discussions, but we all come to the table with the same purpose. And that is, you know, how do we serve our members? How do we protect them? And sometimes from, you know, government action or number one, how do we work together to better inform our members what's coming in the future?

Bob Gilbert (20:58):

So as you look at the changing makeup or demographic psychographic of those passengers, if you will, and you mentioned before that you know, your folks, you know, went on the buses and went on a tour, did the Rose Bowl and you know, Grand Canyon. What is the shift in demographic, gen x's, boomers? What is that mix? What are the trends that you are seeing in terms of the growth within the market?

Peter Pantuso (21:31):

There, there were are a couple of things. And I, I would say, you know, one of my biggest frustrations when I early came to the industry was I would go to Union Station, which now our office is two blocks away from Union Station. And on a Friday, well, there were a number of buses leaving for New York City, for example. You saw everybody lined up at the train. By everybody, I mean the 20 somethings, 30 somethings who worked on Capitol Hill, who were going to New York for the weekend, you know, there wouldn't have thought most of them, of going down to the bus station, which at that time was again, about two or three blocks away just on the other side of us, or it was at that time. And then the other frustration when I thought about the passengers were that people rode the bus basically until they were in their twenties or basically until they got out college, right?

Peter Pantuso (22:20):

Once they, once they got out of college, or even in college and they had a car and they could drive themselves, they stopped riding the bus, the school bus, the band bus, the bus to special events. And they didn't ride again until they were in their sixties. So we lost two full generations of potential bus passengers and we had to resell them after being away from the bus for 40 years. And that was, you know, sort of my parents and even my generation at that time. Now, when I go to New York City for work or for pleasure, you know, I'm by far the oldest person on there. I'm probably, you know, two or three times the age past the people. And it's a younger crowd. It's a much younger dynamic. The passengers on the bus. I think the early statistic when I first came to ABA was that somewhere in the neighborhood of 60 or 65% of the passengers were, you know, seniors, senior adults, and, you know, a smaller percentage, obviously 30 to 35% were students and there wasn't much in between because of that 40 year gap.

Peter Pantuso (23:20):

Now when you look at the demographics, it tends to tilt much younger. It's much more of a student oriented population. It's, you know, 60 up to 60% maybe, you know, under 35. And then obviously an older demographic in the other part. And there, and there's a big mix in the middle. That 20 to 60 year old group, you know, does ride the bus. But they do it for different things. They do it for sporting events, they do it to go to the wineries, they take it to the beach. You know, any numbers of things that people didn't offer before. And I think that's beauty of group travel, right? We can create a product that appears to whatever the newest demographic or trend is. We can create a product inside of that 45 foot by 12 foot wide box can be anything you want to make it. So it can be, you know, 50 seats of two and two going back, or as a bus that operates out of DC and goes here to New York and back is called The Jet. It's only got 18 seats and they're motion canceling so that you never feel bumps all the way. So those are the kinds of trends in the industry that significantly make and create opportunities for new passengers to experience a very new experience and they might have thought about or thought they were going to get before.

Bob Gilbert (24:35):

Thanks for listening to part one of this episode. Tune in next time for part two. Please like, subscribe, and leave a review. You can also visit EddyAlexander.com to learn more about our tourism, marketing, and destination management services and read some of our recent case studies.

Part Two:

Bob Gilbert (00:08):

Welcome to Tourism Heads and Their Tales, a podcast series that invites travel and tourism leaders and influencers to share their take on key industry issues. My name is Bob Gilbert and I'm the general manager for the tourism and destination marketing practice at the award-winning strategic marketing agency Eddy Alexander. My career spans over three decades in the travel and tourism industry where I've had the privilege of working with iconic brands and so many amazing colleagues who in their own ways are pushing the industry forward and using tourism to increase understanding, access and quality of life. For those who work in travel, those that love to travel, and the communities that benefit from travel. I'll be bringing you into the conversation with top professionals who are shaping the industry all with their unique tales and perspectives that they're ready to share with you. So let's rejoin Pete Pantuso, President and CEO of the American Bus Association, part two on Tourism Heads and Their Tales. You mentioned, um, a minute ago SITA, which for those that don't know, listening out there as the Student Youth Travel Association, I would imagine based upon what you just said, that you have a very close relationship with Carylann Assante in that organization. Do you present at their events or how does that relationship work?

Peter Pantuso (01:33):

Yeah, we've got a great relationship. I haven't presented, I have before, but I haven't done it recently. But I've been a presenter there. I've been on panels there before.

Peter Pantuso (01:42):

And you're right. You know, we are absolutely connected at the hip because of the clientele that her members represent. And obviously some of her members, i.e. the tour operators and the travel members, many of them are members here as well, but the constituents that they serve are growing constituency and they represent, you know, student travel literally all over the world, not just

Bob Gilbert (02:04):

Yep.

Peter Pantuso (02:04):

In North America. They've got a very, very broad footprint. And their goal, obviously is to enhance student travel, give people opportunities to travel that might not otherwise have them, and create new travelers, which also helps with education, bringing people together from different countries. All of the things that they do and that they're so prolific at is good for the industry and helps grow the industry.

Bob Gilbert (02:26):

So the other question I had that I think is student or a younger demographic, and it's a council that I had not heard of before the Entertainer Motor Coach Council. Can you please clarify or explain the Entertainer Motor Coach Council and what's the makeup of the members and who's the target audience there?

Peter Pantuso (02:50):

Sure. So they are the motor coach companies specifically that represent and provide transportation for bands for entertainers all over the country. And so many of them are down in the Nashville area, but they are in all parts of North America. And way we created that council was by talking to a number of them and having run into them at meetings and they said, yeah, we, we operate a bus just like everybody else does. We have a very different clientele and sometimes that clientele needs, you know, 10 or 15 buses for a tour.

Peter Pantuso (03:24):

Beyonce's tour, I think used 18 or 20 buses, if I remember, in addition to all of the rigging and trucks that they used on top of that. But, you know, some of the country entertainers might have, you know, 4, 5, 6, 7 coaches that are out there between crews that are doing setup and between the band and the star and all of that. So they operate a little bit differently. They're under the same rules and regulations because they're hiring out their vehicles, same rules and regulations that any other motor coach operator would run under. But sometimes those situations that they run into are a little bit unique. For example, a few years ago, there was an issue that the Department of Transportation came up with as it related to roof hatches. And the entertainer coach companies didn't necessarily have roof hatches because they were an ex access point for, you know, somebody trying to get into the bus.

Peter Pantuso (04:18):

They're trying, trying to protect those individuals who were on the bus. So the Department of Transportation came back and said, no, no, you've got to have the same, same kind of roof hatches that all other buses have. So we were able to, to represent them, if you will, before the Department of Transportation to make sure the Department of Transportation understood that, you know, this is an access point for, you know, some nut that wanted to get close to an entertainer. And so, you know, is there a different way to handle it and still provide the same kind of ability for escape in the case of an emergency of some kind. Same thing happened with seat belts on buses. The Department of Transportation said, yeah, you've got to have seat belts on these buses even though they don't have the standard seat. In most cases, every seat is custom made and their couches facing sideways. So three point belts on a couch that fits sideways might not work. And so could we find a way to provide the same kind of protection for the customer without necessarily doing it as one size fits all as you would for a motor coach?

Bob Gilbert (05:14):

Right. You know, it's interesting. I recently went to a Peter Gabriel concert and I used to work with him 40 plus years ago. And the difference between then and now to see all the buses outside and the sophistication of the travel requirements, you know, by their management companies, it's a long shout from, you know, when we used the dust travel in a little minivan, and the, the folks, uh, who would put up the rigs, you know, they would kind of all scrunch into the front seat of the truck and go from city to city. But it is amazing to see that change. It was a great concert, by the way. That's good. So you brought up safety issues there and, and you have a couple of councils that kind of lean into that. You have the Bus Industry Safety Council and I guess related the bus maintenance and repair council. I guess there's a need for both, but they just seem to me to kind of overlap a little bit, you know, do they, or

Peter Pantuso (06:17):

A little bit. But you know, there're really two different functions within most companies where the safety director at a company is focused on safety regulations that affect, you know, driver's hours, drug testing, driver hiring and training practices where the maintenance is more on the equipment side.

Peter Pantuso (06:36):

So they certainly overlap because of some of the safety provisions overlap into, you know, the vehicle itself. Not just the driver, not just training, but in most companies, many companies, they are two completely separate functions. We had, the Safety Council has been around now for a number of years. It was started by a gentleman here by the name of Norm Littler, who has since unfortunately passed on. But he was a great advocate for safety and was, you know, one of our stars at the time that he was with us. And then from that we started hearing from some of the maintenance professionals that said, "hey, you know, safety kind of isn't my thing. I'm more involved with the equipment and so is there a role for me or can you create something for me?" And that's how we created the Bus Maintenance and Repair Council. They meet at the same time, they actually overlap a little bit.

Peter Pantuso (07:27):

The bisk, if you will, the Safety Council meets for a couple of days and then Maintenance Council meets right after that with a little bit of overlap on some topics that would relate to both sides. The Maintenance Council's also pretty hands on both of the meet twice a year. And when we have the Maintenance Council meetings, we usually try to take those individuals out, some of the facilities so that they can see, you know, how someone else does it, what kind of repair facilities they have and how they operate their equipment, maybe a little differently than some of the people in the meeting have experienced before.

Bob Gilbert (07:59):

Right. International, I do recall when I was hands-on, you know, working with operators that their clientele were coming from overseas, but the buses that they, that they operated with were domestic. So there was that crossover and synergy between an international operator that served the international visitor, but required the routes that were organized by the domestic operator. How has that changed and is that now coming back slowly or coming back, you know, from that international community? Obviously that was also hit by, Covid pretty hard as well.

Peter Pantuso (08:49):

Yeah, the international is an interesting piece. As you well know, so many of the international travelers for the first time coming to a destination, whether they're coming here or you know, somebody going overseas, a lot of times you go by group for your first trip because there's a comfort level and somebody else is planning it, making the arrangements, you're going to a place you're maybe not familiar with.

Peter Pantuso (09:11):

And then, you know, as they have that experience and they want to continue to come back, often they come back as individuals or smaller groups. The international inbound, is a very big piece of the motor coach business, especially in the gateway cities where they're arriving. Certainly New York and Philly and Chicago, la, San Francisco, obviously Orlando, all major destinations and a lot of the coach operators down there specialize in, in the international inbound business. You know, we, we saw certainly during Covid obviously it fell off to almost nothing. I was at IPW, earlier this year, and what I saw there was certainly a resurgence and an excitement about the business coming back. But clearly, you know, we're

missing a number of groups. There were very little interest it appeared or inbound interest from the Chinese market where that was a dominant

Peter Pantuso (10:05):

Force for. And I think, you know, politics and the economy certainly play into that. I don't know when we're going to see that market return. Obviously what's going on in Eastern Europe and in Russia, you know, that creates a lack of travelers from those regions, you know, and now what we're seeing obviously in the Middle East is going to have an impact and travelers, you know, to and from that region. So the inbound market I think is going to be a bit disrupted. But you know, again, I'm encouraged by what I saw earlier in the year that it's certainly coming back from, you know, from where it was during Covid.

Bob Gilbert (10:41):

Yeah. You know, it's interesting to see that the countries, I don't know if, if the word reliance is the right word, but I'll use it anyway because it does describe the end result, which is that reliance upon the Chinese market. And you know, I was in Beijing some years back when the USA China Tourism Agreement was put into place and it was launched out in Beijing and then celebrated here in DC and it did have an impact. But now, you know, we just wait and see how politics play out with politics and pandemic. But I think probably more on the political side, unfortunately,

Peter Pantuso (11:20):

Yes.

Bob Gilbert (11:20):

So I'm a destination and things have changed. There's a whole new team in place in my destination. I think that I would like to get more active within the motor coach business. How do I go about evaluating and assessing my desirability within my particular destination? And if it is, a fit for the motor coach business, it's, I think year round, it really depends upon where we are in the country. But what, what do I do to self-assess to see if there's a right fit for me and my destination?

Peter Pantuso (12:00):

Yeah, that's a great point because not every place is a good fit or not every destination, not every hotel or restaurant is necessarily a good fit for groups. So I think that's the first step is determining, you know, what you have in a given area or region that's going to serve as the group market, what's going to fit there if you want those groups to come and spend time at your destination. Now the other side of that is, you know, maybe you're not a destination and maybe it doesn't fit, but maybe you're a stopover from somewhere else or enroute to somewhere else. So I think that's the other part of the equation as well. So I think you start with, you know, looking at what you've got as product and then trying to understand, you know, if that is a fit. And if you can make yourself a place that groups want to come to working with your partners, because again, kind of goes back to the earlier discussion.

Peter Pantuso (12:50):

Nobody can really do it on their own. Nobody has anything by itself that normally that someone is going to want to go and see in and of itself. And I don't care if you've got the best product, the best museum, the only one of a kind, you know, you still need to have those partners. I was talking to a museum out in the Midwest that just joined a couple of weeks ago, and when I was talking to their head of marketing,

they talked about, you know, how successful they are and getting people to come there. But I said, you don't have groups there now, and you want to build that market and you have to recognize that you are not the only reason they're there. They also need hotels and restaurants. So that's where you start looking at what you've got in terms of inventory and then talking to partners in the region and seeing if they're also as committed as you are to building that market once you make that decision.

Peter Pantuso (13:38):

And if the answer, assuming is yes, then you know, there's a couple ways to go about it. Obviously, you know, we'd love to have them join the American Bus Association and participate in marketplace so that they have an opportunity to showcase themselves. You know, they also have an opportunity to start very, very small. And as I've said to many who have looked at the market who may not be members said, you know, start locally and, and look within, a you know, an hours or a day's drive and see who you can attract locally and bring them into that business and start building it slowly. And then, you know, the other side of that equation, as I mentioned, you know, maybe you're just a stopover. Look at who's traveling to and from let's say within three or four hours on either side of you, and are you a stop for them?

Peter Pantuso (14:21):

Do you have something that you can offer them in the very short term, again, building that group product, maybe it's not overnights, but maybe it's a restaurant or maybe it is a museum. And you know, the challenge I see in, in many, many places is that too often, as we all know, you know, you're never a tourist in your backyard. So I think of my little hometown that I grew up in a little town called Bradford, Pennsylvania on the New York border, a little bit east of Erie, Pennsylvania. When I was a kid growing up, you know, nobody thought of it as tourism and nobody thought of getting buses or attracting groups there. And now when I go back, you know, we have a Zippo Museum. It's the only place Zippo Lighters are made. We've got some good hotels, we've got some good restaurant product that will take care of, you know, 50 people at one time. So they've begun to expand, you know, their footprint in the group travel market, but they've done it incrementally and they've done it in a way that allowed them to be successful. You know, if they'd have said, yeah, we want groups and come on, and there wasn't the infrastructure to handle them, it would've been a complete failure. It would've been hard getting people to come back again.

Bob Gilbert (15:27):

So the word infrastructure is key in terms of if I'm a destination and I have my checklist, you know, I need to make sure that my destination, my community, my stakeholders are ready to accept a group. You know, which obviously for hotels, they're probably more familiar with all of the requirements and certainly have a range of rates, you know, group rates ten or more, et cetera. But I think the same goes for the attractions as well. I mean, there are many museums and, and attractions that don't offer group rates, and don't have parking for buses or it's maybe not easy. So I think, you know, those destinations need to go through that and make it easy to be attractive to the operator. And there are a bunch of places that I say that are not quite ready even after so many years that they have to go back to the starting point to do that self-assessment. Do you really want to attract and can you host the bus market? Sometimes that's a tough decision to make.

Peter Pantuso (16:37):

It is because sometimes, as you know, Bob, it is the shiny bobble, right? Yes. I want 50 people coming in the door. There's no question that, you know, a restaurant or hotel, you know, wants to see that, but are you really prepared 50, right? Are you, are you prepared to not have 50 people standing in line to check into the hotel? Can you give them the keys in advance? Can you give them to the group leader so that they can hand them out? Or can you have a little wine reception in another room while the keys are being distributed and bags are being taken to the rooms and you do, you know, little things like that that make you more group friendly. Don't take that much effort, but move you to that next level of just being beyond just accepting 50 people. Right? But doing it well,

Bob Gilbert (17:18):

It shows you care, it shows you want and appreciate the business at the end of the day. So tell me, what keeps you up at night? Is it the workforce drivers, people applying for CDLs? I mean, what are the issues that keep you tossing and turning at night?

Peter Pantuso (17:35):

Yeah, it's a great, question. It'll probably more than your audience wants to know, but for whatever reason, almost every dream I have at night is about work, right? Almost every single dream has, has got a work component to it. So work keeps me up at night and, sometimes when I get to work, I feel like I've already put in a full day because I was, you know, dealing with some of the same issues in my sleep. You know, certainly there's a number of things though. You know, when you think about the economy and its impact on travel and group travel, when you think about unrest in the world, when you think about the, the regulations and laws that go through Congress or go through the regulatory process, through different agencies that have an impact on the industry, that keeps me up at night thinking about, you know, our own team here, our staff, and how do we continue to make the association successful.

Peter Pantuso (18:28):

Thinking about our members and how, you know, we talked about the dynamics change, the customer changes, the, the industry changes. You know, how do we stay in front of that so that we're not losing pace and we're helping move the industry to another level. Nothing more frustrating to me than when we're doing things to kind of keep pace and stay even as opposed to trying to move it to another level to stay ahead of it and help bring our members along as well. So those are the things that I think about literally day and night and in my sleep sometimes as well.

Bob Gilbert (19:02):

Well, I guess your history as associations, and I think at the core of that is from a member perspective, am I seeing tangible value? And so I think that, you know, that's a tough job to demonstrate added value almost on a daily basis. If I was in your shoes, I think that would keep me up at night.

Peter Pantuso (19:23):

You know, there's a saying in the association world, it, you know, you're described as a servant leader and it's that balance between, you know, serving the customer and you're right, always creating that value and that next opportunity for them being there to represent them, but serving them, but also serving, being in a leadership role where you have the ability to lead the industry and lead the industry forward. So that balance, those two pieces are, are what are absolutely critical.

Bob Gilbert (19:52):

So as we talking about leading and moving forward, notwithstanding your retirement sometime between today and September of next year, what do you see as the future for the American Bus Association? Where would you like it to be? I guess there's two parts to that question, where you see it being and where you would like it to be seen.

Peter Pantuso (20:17):

Obviously I'd like to see it continue to grow and be successful. I'd like to see opportunities in the future to even partner more with our competitors, uh, other trade associations and find a way that we can further collaborate on a number of things. Maybe it's only one giant show in the group travel industry in the, in the future providing more education opportunities for the industry and for all of our members as well. You know, those are certainly priorities I think need to be addressed down the road. Obviously we are a government affairs oriented organization as well. It's why we were created in 1926 was to make sure that the government didn't encroach in the business too much, or if they did that it was done in a measured way. And so we'll continue to have that focus. I'm sure in Washington, the motor coach operators in particular have more regulatory oversight from the federal government, from the legislature than really most of the other segments of the industry do.

Peter Pantuso (21:21):

So they're impacted more by what goes on here. But, you know, continuing to fight the fight, if you will, on behalf of the industry, is going to be critical. And I know that, you know, I had the benefit again, of following somebody who was able to take the organization, as I said, from zero up to a level. Hopefully I've taken it from that point, you know, to a different level. And I'm hopeful that the next person will take it even further and, and be even more successful. But provide is the word that you used earlier. Value continue to provide that value that the members are seeking.

Bob Gilbert (21:57):

Well, you mentioned before about value, the principle of servant leading. Um, you are a great leader and I've really appreciated our conversation and really enjoyed our conversation today, Pete and I wish you much success with the future, wherever that takes you. And thank you so much for being on our podcast today, and I'm sure everybody who's out there listening, we have thousands of listeners to tourism heads and their towers will enjoy today's episode. So thank you Pete Pantuso, President and CEO of the American Bus Association. We hope you enjoyed today's episode. Please like thumbs up, subscribe and leave a review. You can also visit EddyAlexander.com to learn more about our tourism, marketing, and destination management services and read some of our recent case studies.