

Shanghai Company Seeks Relationships Before Profit

Cathleen Lamprecht offers useful tips for operators looking to pursue the Chinese market as well as quality affiliates everywhere.

By Lexi Tucker, LCT associate editor

SHANGHAI, China — Before she got involved in the luxury ground transportation business, Cathleen Lamprecht, co-owner of BCD Limo, never thought she'd be a part of it. Years ago, she didn't even know limousine service was a separate industry; she always thought corporations, movie companies, and major brands owned the cars and chauffeurs themselves. After getting involved, she grew to love what she does, and values the relationships she's formed.

Winning Business In China

For American companies doing business in China, rates are important, but not the only factor to consider. "I know a lot of transportation companies in China label their cars. If you are looking for someone to represent you, make sure to ask about that," she says.

English-speaking chauffeurs are also not that common. "In our fleet, we have different levels of English-speaking chauffeurs: Ones who can communicate fluently, and ones who can only greet and communicate with software. Be sure to get clarification on that as well."

Some car models in China may not exist in America; for example, the

most common sedan, the Audi A6L, is a longer version of the A6 and has more room. SUVs as chauffeur service vehicles are also not as common. Ask about the type of cars that can be used, and don't assume.

"A lot of the time, peoples' mentalities differ among countries. Open lines of communication are best to ensure nothing gets lost in translation. Asking detailed questions can help you avoid a lot of unnecessary incidents."

Same Challenges, Various Locations

Her service areas pose many challenges that resemble those operators face worldwide. One is to hire and keep talented,

English-speaking chauffeurs. "We overcame this issue by giving them competitive benefits, good pay, and offering them part ownership of the vehicle they are driving so they can treat it as their own. Sometimes I joke with my partners the drivers are making more money than us."

The second challenge for the company was to collect foreign credit card payments, as China has strict rules on foreign currency regulations and POS machines. "We solved this by using a merchant service company in Canada. In the beginning, we ran into issues with getting the money back into our account from the merchant service company, but that has finally been solved this year."

BCD Is Born

After Lamprecht graduated from college in Montreal, Quebec, she moved to China to start her own businesses in 2009. Because her family has been in the wine business for over 28 years, she first started a wine importing company. In 2010, many wineries came to China to exhibit at the World Expo.

Her company and some of her friends provided free chauffeured car service for the wineries that attended that year. Although BCD didn't get paid for its services, visitors appreciated them and tipped the chauffeurs well. "One of



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my friends asked me, ‘Since you’re good at providing diligent and high-quality service, why don’t you start a chauffeur service company?’ I agreed!”

However, it wasn’t until 2015 she got fully involved in all the operations. The company was not called BCD in the beginning because she didn’t travel out of China to meet affiliates and partners. So the company only had a Chinese name. In 2015, a third silent investor partner joined the company, providing the money to expand. She also traveled for the first time outside of China to meet clients, affiliates, and partners.

“Originally, BCD was composed of the

for holidays to visit her parents, and to check in on the company’s accounting office they opened at the end of 2017 due to the difficulties of collecting foreign credit cards in China. Her mother now manages that office.

The fleet includes executive sedans such as the Audi A6L and Mercedes-Benz E-Class, and the Mercedes-Benz S-Class as their premium luxury sedan. They used to have the BMW 520i, but had to get rid of them because the trunk was too small. Their larger vehicles include the Buick GL8, as well as more luxurious options such as the Mercedes-Benz V-Class, Toyota



Professionally dressed chauffeurs and clean cars are ready to make an excellent impression on clients.

“I used to be easily influenced by what others were doing. If other companies did an event, I felt we should also. If another business started a new program, I believed we should do that, too. But at the end of the day, it might not be suitable, and time and resources were wasted. There’s a saying in Chinese that loosely translates to ‘eating what’s in your bowl but still wanting what is in the pot.’ It’s good to learn from other people’s mistakes, but always consider what’s best for yourself.”

BCD Limo at the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.



first initials of the three partners, but now we have evolved into what we believe to be Best China Driven,” she says.

BCD Limo provides service all over China, Hong Kong, and Macao. These areas are strongest in business-friendly policies and government connections. Now Lamprecht only travels to Canada

Alphard, and Mercedes-Benz Sprinters. These seven types of vehicles are the most common in the luxury transportation industry in China, and used by the government, too.

Tough Experiences

The first lesson she learned about the industry was how some clients will try to swindle you. “Stories often range from booking a top luxury vehicle for an entire week or two, to asking if they can charge their card for more than the trip amount and receive cash in return. Luckily we didn’t fall for any of the big tricks. Now our operations team is aware and checks for authenticity of the booker before confirming a reservation.”

Another lesson Lamprecht has learned is to do your own thing, do it well, and don’t think too much.

Looking Ahead

The company has added security to its transportation service, and will promote this further in the coming months. She hopes to set a standard for luxury transportation service in China, and plans to partner with other companies worldwide to start certified training programs for chauffeurs and bodyguards to improve the standards of the Chinese service industry. In the future, she’d like to see equality between races and sexes in every industry.

“Operational wise, it would be great if all booking systems would unite so reservations could be sent, received, and confirmed on any kind of system. This will greatly save reservationists’ time and allow everyone to achieve higher accuracy in bookings,” she says.

Finally, she hopes readers will keep this ancient Chinese saying in mind: Give before you receive. “Our first goal isn’t to make money, but to make friends. I’m very glad I have a good-hearted team that truly cares about our clients. Our motto is ‘always go the extra mile for our friends and clients.’ I believe our diligence and loyalty will take us a long way. Last but not least, since I grew up around it, I love food and wine. To all my friends and friends to be, you’re all welcome to share a glass of wine with me.” **LCT**

— Lexi@LCTmag.com

FASTFACTS

BCD LIMO

LOCATION: Headquarters in Shanghai, fleet and offices in Beijing and Hong Kong

OWNERS: A privately held partnership consisting of three principals

FOUNDED: 2010

VEHICLE TYPES: Audi A6L, Mercedes-Benz E-Class, Buick GL8, Mercedes-Benz V-Class, Toyota Alphard, Mercedes-Benz Sprinters, Mercedes-Benz S-Class

VEHICLE TOTAL: 95 from all three fleet offices

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