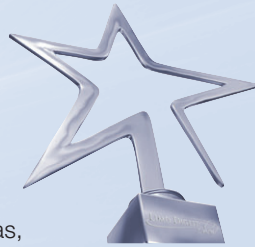


LARGE OPERATOR OF THE YEAR



Valera Global Long Island City, New York



L to R: David Eckstein, Kimberly Renee of the Limo Digest Show, and Naomi Glaser

In 1987, four distinct entrepreneurial minds—David Eckstein, Naomi Glaser, Rod Barfield, Dolores Battelli—got together and contemplated opening a premium black car service in their native New York. The four hailed from very different backgrounds: Eckstein and Barfield met

while serving on the board of directors of one of the original 13 New York City medallion taxi cooperatives. Eckstein, with a degree in systems management, focused on computerizing the dispatch operations and redeveloped a program for the black car industry in 1983. Barfield, a teacher, became involved in the company's dispatch operations and fleet management, and developed one of the industry's most highly intensive driver training programs. Battelli, a math department chair in the NYC school system with a knack for finances, helped design and became responsible for the company's money management system. Glaser combined her experience in the corporate and professional creative and therapeutic sector to initiate, direct, and manage the sales, marketing, and customer relations efforts of the company. The four partners, who are still active in the company today, blended their strengths beautifully.

The company, then known as Computer Car, targeted senior level executives and fulfilled their exclusive transportation needs. Banking on some relationships the four had in their respective business circles, their original marketing push was unique: branded key chains and flyers. Sales steadily increased, and by 2007, the once six-car fleet was over 215 vehicles. Twenty years later, 49 of its original customers from the first 2 years are still calling on the service. In 1988, Valera Global's sales were just over one million dollars, and the company projects to do \$27 million in 2007.

This past year, Computer Car began a major rebranding effort through the combined team efforts of Glaser and Mackasek. This re-branding coincided with the launch of its international status, which began in January 2006. Glaser credits Eckstein, her partner and husband, with the idea: "David wanted to set up a national and international network of affiliates," says Glaser. "We targeted places where our customers were already going, and David would go to the airport and personally observe how certain chauffeurs dressed, acted, and greeted customers, as well as how they maintained their vehicles." If the chauffeur fit well overall with Valera's standards, Eckstein opened dialogue with company. The process is slow and steady, although 45 affiliates globally are already in place, with an anticipated 150 in the works over the next few years.

Robert Mackasek joined the company in 2000 as dispatch operations manager, and became the company's CEO in 2005. Mackasek is "the balance" for the four and he brings the reality

and sanity to the partners' ideas, including the growth of its affiliates, according to Glaser. Once the couples' personal attorney, Mackasek was familiar with Valera's goals and in line with its mission long before he became an employee of the company. Before Mackasek formed his own law firm he was the deputy commissioner of the NYC Taxi and Limousine Commission. Mackasek was instrumental bringing four separate entrepreneurs' management styles and talents together to follow his lead, which is no easy feat for a fleet of 215 vehicles and independent chauffeurs and 90 office employees. His vote on the board of directors allowed Valera Global to move forward when the board was at a stalemate. One example of this forward move was the decision to implement the DriveCam system in all of its vehicles. The costly endeavor has been well worth the price, according to Mackasek. "It was an expensive investment, but the savings earned the company many times over the initial cost outlay because our insurance rates dropped and to this day continue to fall. The DriveCam system, an onboard camera that is activated when the car is involved in aggressive acceleration, erratic driving, or an accident, is used as a training tool for its chauffeurs. "It's been a very effective training tool for us," says Mackasek, who reviews the patterns with his chauffeurs. "It gives us a chance to talk to our chauffeurs and to correct certain habits."

Valera prefers chauffeurs who have no experience in the transportation industry and train them in the company's exacting standards. The company was founded on meeting the needs of those high-end executives who expect a certain level of professionalism and discretion, and all chauffeurs are trained for over 200 hours to those specific expectations. "We have a strict screening process because our customers are typically type A personalities and we can't have a type A chauffeur driving," says Mackasek.

The company has not been without its ups and downs, but it always bounces back stronger and wiser for the lesson. When other companies were going out of business in the early-90s economic bust, Valera soldiered on. The company, like most companies in New York City, was also impacted hard a decade later with 9/11. The fleet dropped by about 25-30 percent but has since rebounded to its pre-9/11 level. Since day one, the partners have strategically limited the amount of business from any one company to 7 percent of Valera's total gross volume so that it is not reliant on any particular client for business. About 10 chauffeurs left the company, but Glaser is proud of the fact that not one employee was let go, and the board of directors took a salary cut in order to keep the workforce solid and motivated. "We're a very family-oriented company," says Glaser. "Our staff is a close-knit family. We were all impacted by the event—some of us personally—but we kept moving forward."



Robert Mackasek, CEO

In 1997, the company moved to its current facility, a 38,000-square-foot renovation. The facility is also home to the company's office staff, some of whom have been with the company since its inception. The company boasts one of the best office staff to chauffeurs ratios in the industry, and the office staff is chosen just as carefully as the company's chauffeur force. Along with many employee motivational programs such as dress up Halloween Day, picnics, and an annual awards dinner, Valera holds employee and chauffeur appreciation days two times a year and has incentive programs to encourage top performance.

Valera is also taking on another new challenge: reducing its carbon footprint. Encouraged by Glaser and Eckstein's daughter, a senior in a business college, Mackasek took notes from the emphatic budding environmentalist who made recommendations to reduce waste and energy consumption as well as investigated and researched a partnership with the Chicago Climate Exchange (CCX). Mackasek decided to lead the charge and steer clear of adding hybrids to Valera's fleet because it did not make environmental sense—as most of Valera's runs were on the highway where the car would primarily be burning fossil fuels—and he instead focused on the operations end. Valera partnered with the CCX, a voluntary membership that audits and counsels companies on how to reduce and offset its carbon footprint. "They come in an audit us on an international protocol, and based on our consumption, we contribute a certain amount annually to developing fossil fuel alternatives," says Mackasek.

Valera's offset was equal to \$30,000 this past year. Mackasek is not looking at Valera's eco-friendly attitude as a trend, but he says that the move is making a "good positive statement." Many of Valera's customers have cheered the company's efforts on, adds Glaser.

If the past 20 years are any indication of Valera's solid progress, then the next year will be equally as busy. The company is looking to expand its global presence—slowly and steadily—through the next few years, with an established presence in countries like China. The partners are also tossing around the idea of growing its special events department, for events large and small.

According to Glaser, there is also tremendous opportunity in the financial industries and with road show marketing, which are daily multi-stop whirlwind tours or meetings for executives, and they are both something the company will seriously consider and possibly pursue—with Mackasek's blessing of course—in the coming year.



Board of Directors L to R: David Eckstein, Naomi Glaser, Robert Mackasek, Dolores Battelli, and Rod Barfield



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