



The favour that blossomed into a business

What began as a favour to a friend to deliver one car has grown into a business that in the last 12 months has delivered 42,000 vehicles.

It was in 2002 that Joss Ronchetti got an urgent call from Philip Hall, sales manager at Guy Salmon Jaguar in Coventry. A customer in North London was awaiting delivery of a new XKR and the driver assigned to the task had been injured and taken to hospital.

From that came other word-of-mouth recommendations and before long Ronchetti gave up his job as a freelance race and rally car instructor and enlisted his brother to help with the increasing workload.

Today, PRO-Driver moves around 1,000 cars each week, ranging from dealer-to-dealer used cars to corporate sales and group buyer collections. The company's biggest client over the past 12 months has been Sytner Leicester BMW, with just under 4,500 deliveries.



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Neil Lakin, PRO-Driver

Sytner Group has used PRO-Driver for corporate sales for the past 10 years, delivering more than 6,000 vehicles over the past 12 months and coming top for CSI performance.

At any one time, PRO-Driver can call on its nationwide network of 90 or so trade-plated drivers, who are all self-employed and non-agency, that complement those directly employed for the fleet of 24 transporters.

Those applying for a trade-plated role are assessed by former police driving instructor John Hunting not only for driving ability but also 'hand-over' skills. "Some applicants think it's just a driving job from A to B and out of every 10 we assess only two or three are successful," says commercial director Neil Lakin.

With drivers – uniformed and wearing identity lanyards – collectively travelling over 3.9 million miles each year, Lakin describes the logistics as "a spider's web that's always being rewoven".

At the heart of the operation is a bespoke computer package, introduced in 2013, that covers all needs from bookings to vehicle movements, to accounting and clients signing off on drivers' PDAs for collections and deliveries.

"This technology means that within one hour of a vehicle being delivered (subject to network coverage) the vehicle condition report and other information will arrive by email at all parties concerned," says Lakin.

That 'other information' includes "total transparency" of fuel usage. "On every vehicle movement we take an image of the start mileage and start fuel gauge at the collection point," Lakin explains. "The finish mileage and fuel gauge are also photographed at the delivery point. These images, along with receipts for fuel that may have to be bought en route, are emailed to the booking dealer as soon as the vehicle has been accepted at the delivery point."

Bookings are handled by a 14-strong admin team at PRO-Driver's Leicester HQ and each driver's schedule is displayed on screens that change colour – green when the driver is in possession and red when the vehicle has been signed for at delivery.

The jobs also have colour-coded lines to indicate the method of delivery – aboard a transporter, for instance – the category of customer and the level of service (standard, silver or gold).

Finally, there is a 65-inch touchscreen showing the current location of drivers (by tracker), the collection and delivery points and nearest available driver to any location.

"Typically, through his PDA, a driver will have a day's notice of his next job," says Lakin. "It could be



anywhere from Bolton to Southampton, with a collection from Southampton to Milton Keynes. Crucially, because it operates postcode to postcode, the client is not paying for the return journey."

Ronchetti's original costing principle is still essentially the same: A price per mile, plus fuel and expenses, 10 per cent cheaper than someone using their own driver.

Five years ago most of PRO-Driver's work was shifting used cars, and this still accounts for around 15,000 movements, a significant number of which fall within the company's 'appraise and buy' service.

"This can be either a dealer or a private individual seeking the assurance that what they're buying fits in with the information they've been given," says Lakin. "So our driver will carry out an inspection for any damage and a road test."

However, this is now exceeded by corporate movements, totalling more than 22,000 a year.

As well as savings on employed drivers and transporter costs, PRO-Driver points to the advantage of dealers not having to worry about uninsured losses.

"It doesn't take too much accident damage, especially with the higher-end models, to end up paying more than the £5,000 excess and the average cost to a dealer is around £80k a year, depending on the amount of their excess," explains Lakin.

He cited one dealer, now a PRO-Driver customer, who faced a bill for £15,000 in uninsured loss after three cars were damaged while being moved in a confined compound.

"Our insurer recently examined our mileage, number of drivers, the variety of locations, put every

other factor into the equation and said our excess should be triple the amount we pay!"

Latest developments include a further five vehicles for the truck fleet, an online booking portal and an electronic 'gateway' for data transfer. The gateway allows dealers to have pre-loaded forms that need to be signed by the customer – these may be for simple customer acceptance, proof of delivery, leasing documents or CSI score forms. These documents also arrive instantly back to the booking dealer's email inbox.

The gateway, with benefits that include speedier payments, is designed to complement the MoDel lease document service for which the company has 110 driver handsets.

In terms of scale and sophistication, today's operation is a long way removed from August 2002 when PRO-Driver began trading in Joss Ronchetti's house, with his wife Suzy answering the phone and doing the paperwork while looking after their newborn daughter.

But Ronchetti points to the founding principles that continue to drive the business: phones

answered 24/7; trained drivers in smart uniform, representing clients and customers to the highest standard; and an assurance that "if you are in a mess, call us and we will get it sorted for you".

"Anyone can set themselves up as a logistics business – often as one-man bands trying to arrange bookings while they are on the road," says Lakin.

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For more information call
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