

# The language of

Specialist provider of multi-lingual commentary systems, V6e has won the backing of some of the leading players in the field.

**T**OUR bus operations have come a long way in recent years. The quality of vehicles and the slickness of the marketing has helped develop them into an important growth area with UK-based companies leading the way in developing tours across the world.

And as a tourism product for visitors, whether to the UK or elsewhere, one of the most important innovations has been the development of multi-lingual commentaries. Enabling the tour bus passenger to get a full and rich image of the city in words as well as the view from the vehicle, enriches the experience and makes it a must-do activity for visitors.

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But of course the commentary is only as good as the system that delivers it and Bristol-based V6e has clinched some key orders in the past year with the launch of its new 24-language system that delivers digital sound quality to every seat with a whole range of additional features to make it easy for operators to use and adapt to their own needs.

The Big Bus Company is now using V6e's L-Verbum system on its core product and installed it into the first ever tour bus operation for Hong Kong which launched with ten vehicles last December, and there are another eight on order. "We had a demo system working in London and it proved to be very good," says Gerry Price, engineering director, Big Bus Company. "For

robustness there is nothing better."

In developing the L-Verbum system, V6e's Nathan Scott asked customers of its original 10-channel Vocis product, what they would like in the next generation. One of the main suggestions was the ability to get reports on how often the various languages were used. So this is exactly what was built into the L-Verbum units and it is something that is very important to Gerry Price. "It is quite expensive to record all the languages so it's very useful to have information on which ones are actually used by passengers, and how often."

The data on language use is invaluable in giving operators solid data on their customer profile and helps to improve their future marketing and development of tours.

And the multi-lingual facility doesn't stop at passengers. When the first units were installed in Hong Kong, it became apparent that the Chinese-speaking drivers would need to understand English to trigger the right commentaries at the right place. So Scott developed a further enhancement of the product and installed Chinese language on the driver's screen, something which impressed Gerry Price: "In Hong Kong the original tour text was only in English. V6e just went away and got it changed into Chinese without extra cost. It's a good example of looking after a customer. Their desire to support their customers is immense."

Price also points to a practical example of the quality of the equipment when some of the seat units got waterlogged after the retrofit in Hong Kong. "After they were completely dried out, amazingly, they worked without a problem," says Price.

The Big Bus Company delivers its commentaries in eight languages and in addition to Hong Kong, it has V6e systems installed

in 20 out of 30 of its Dubai tour buses, as well as 20 in London. The systems in Hong Kong were retrofitted, while the Dubai and London buses were installed by the bodybuilder, in the latter case by Optare Blackburn.

Nathan Scott says that the company provides a turnkey solution for operators and bodybuilders. "We provide all the wiring looms and various lengths and try to make the installation job as straightforward as possible. We can arrange the installation, but generally it is carried out by the operator or bodybuilder.

"All of our systems are 100 per cent digital, there's no analogue used at all. This means you don't get bleed from one chan-



# open top tours

nel to another and you can get iPod quality on all channels."

The L-Verbum system is stereo and if you want a demonstration of how effective it is, ask V6e to give you a demonstration of its 'Virtual Barber' commentary which involves you experiencing a very lifelike haircut. It will have you checking that the tips of your ears are still there when the voice-over in your headphones has finished!

The quality of the system also extends to the packaging of the product. All units are supplied fully configured, so if a customer adds an optional extra later then it can easily be upgraded.

The Tour Management Software supplied by V6e provides an

easy way of managing the configuration and content of tours. Users can load new tours and update existing ones with the help of a simple 'Excel-like' spreadsheet. Individual commentary sections can be updated or amended, and sound files can be added in a wide variety of formats. With the TMS system, users can manage and load tour orders, driver titles and descriptions, fillers and diversions, as well as background music, and of course language variants.

The system works on a standard laptop or desktop PC and the file is saved to a compact flashcard which is then read by the onboard military-specification control unit to automatically incorporate all the changes.

The seat modules for L-Verbum are highly water resistant and well proven in exposed conditions on the upper decks of open-top



tour buses with a downward-facing jack point to avoid water ingress. They can be surface- or flush-mounted in the seat backs, roof or sides and the wide-angle FSTN LCD screen is fully readable in the brightest sunlight and back-lit for night use.

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Another innovation introduced as a result of customer requests, is that the units return to a default volume and language when the headphones are removed, ready for the next passenger. These defaults are, of course, fully programmable by the operator.

The system also has a full diagnostic mode to identify any faulty seat units quickly.

As well as its stereo L-Verbum system, V6e still supplies its original 10-channel mono Vocis, which remains a favourite of Lothian Buses for its City Sightseeing operation in Edinburgh.

“It is a very good system and has proved very reliable,” says engineering director Bill Devlin.

Lothian took its first Vocis system for a three-month trial but because of its success at a time of several torrential downpours, ordered 12 units on the strength of it after just a month, and has recently placed a further order.

“We handled the installation ourselves,” says Devlin. “Everything has been channelled-in properly and all the jack points are in the sidewalls with no surface fittings. With an open-top tour bus, you only want to do this type of job once, so we make sure we do it properly first time.

Alongside the Vocis system, City Sightseeing Edinburgh also uses the Tour Management Software for updates, including the introduction of a special Horrible Histories tour for children, narrated by author Terry Deary. The children’s tour works alongside the multi-lingual commentaries on its own channel.

“The beauty of the system is that we can alter all the tours ourselves and deal with any long term diversions that occur,” says Devlin.

“The product has been fantastic and hiccup-free in operation,” he adds. “We also buy all our disposable headphones from V6e as not all headphones are the same, and we want the best.”

Lothian is about to introduce a new low-floor fleet to the City Sightseeing operation and has ordered 12 more systems from V6e. “A lot of electronic systems come as a bit of a black art,” adds Devlin, “with the supplier telling you they have to fix everything and then charge you a fortune to do it. V6e don’t work like that, they are very flexible and are there to help, that’s why we have just ordered another 12.”

The Vocis seat units are, like their stereo counterparts, very robust and waterproof.

Tour commentaries are set up prior to the tour to run in sequence, but driver intervention may be



required to cope with diversions or congestions which might affect timings at set points. Most operators will have fillers that can be initiated by the driver to cover any gaps.

Both the Vocis and L-Verbum systems are controlled by the driver through either a push-button or joystick unit, or even a floor pedal. All of the components are built to last with the push button system developed from heavy duty materials normally found in high-intensity operations in lifts.

V6e is also planning further enhancements including the introduction of a new bespoke connector for the 24-channel system which it has designed itself and will be even easier to fit.

Other V6e customers include Dublin Bus which has eight Vocis systems and recently took two L-Verbums, the latter two specifically because of the statistical reports on language use. In addition, City Sightseeing Dublin, City Sightseeing Glasgow and City Sightseeing York are also users, as well as Arriva’s Original London Sightseeing Tour.

“The 24-channel system has obviously been very well received,” says V6e’s Caroline Bain. “In just three months it outsold what we did on the previous 10-channel system in three years.”

Further development is underway on GPS-controlled systems which are available on both the L-Verbum and Vocis systems. Big Bus is currently trialling one with V6e in London.

“GPS-based systems could well be the future,” says Gerry Price, “as it would make





the tours more uniform and take out a variable."

The theory of GPS control is simple. You set up a tour with a range of trigger points to start commentaries, and because the vehicle always knows where it is, the playing of individual commentaries can be adjusted, or even missed out, to match the real-time progress on the route.

V6e's system can learn a route from a driver or be mapped out with simple GPS desktop software.

It works in a similar way to a car satellite navigation system, but with an intelligent algorithm that enhances the positional accuracy by an order of magnitude. A map is displayed on the information screen that shows the points where the commentary is to be played along the route, but the driver always has the ability to over-ride the automatic system.

If a tour bus is operating in a heavily built-up area where the view of the sky is limited and it only gets the occasional lock on a satellite, the answer, according

to V6e's Nathan Scott, is dead-reckoning. This option involves fitting an additional piece of hardware which includes its own gyroscope and links to the tachograph or additional speed sensor.

The dead-reckoning can accurately assess the vehicle's position at any time from the last fix, direction and speed and continue to trigger commentaries at the right locations.

The ability of V6e's systems to be integrated with passenger information is something that can also be exploited further according to Caroline Bain. "Lothian has fitted large screens in the lower deck in response to requests to meet the needs of those who are hard of hearing. This works well as the commentary can be presented in text form and everyone can enjoy it.

"But you could also use those screens to present passenger information and even advertisements from local businesses."

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And presumably this could also be GPS-linked to show adverts for restaurants or attractions close to the tour bus route before the vehicle arrives there so that the passenger could hop-off for a break and hop back on later.

As well as continuing to look after its existing customers, V6e is now setting its sights on growth in continental Europe and is considering setting up distributors. □

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