bus AND coach Professional

Delivering quality and reliability

Multi-lingual commentary specialist v6e has produced a lower-cost system without sacrificing quality or reliability.

Exceptional quality and low price; it's what everyone wants after all. And Bristol-based supplier of multi-lingual audio systems v6e says that's exactly what its customers will get from its new 16-channel system.

Sermo-16 is the latest-generation system from v6e that provides full digital stereo across 16 channels. It comes complete with central control processor and in common with other products in v6e's range the seat units are specially designed to cope with the harsh environment of an open-top tour bus.

The new product has already attracted a significant order from Arriva's The Original Tour, which is upgrading a number of vehicles in its open-top bus fleet in the capital.

The development of the new Sermo-16 system has resulted from an extensive project aimed at "productionising" the manufacturing process, explains v6e's Nathan Scott: "The whole industry is very cost-conscious at this time and we have decided to respond to this by producing a lower-cost system, without making any sacrifice whatsoever in quality and reliability.

"From the passengers' point of view, the system will look identical to our flagship 24-channel L-Verbum system. But we have managed to take significant costs out of the production process. Sermo-16 will work out around 40 per cent cheaper than the L-Verbum system and cheaper than our original Vocis system."

The new system has been rationalised with a v6e-designed control board and driver's screen, housed in bespoke injection-moulded enclosures, which replaces the on-board computer in earlier systems. The seat units have high quality FSTN screens for day and night viewing, and these have also been upgraded with a new jack socket, designed by Scott himself, and tested for 100,000 cycles. This compares to around 1,000 test cycles for a traditional jack socket. The development and testing has been carried out at v6e's Bristol workshop using a specially designed test rig.

Fewer channels on the new system also means simpler wiring and smaller connectors, but the complete system is still, of course, completely waterproof. The operator, or bodybuilder for OE-fitment usually carries out the fitting of the system, but v6e can arrange its own fitters to handle the work if required.

The success of v6e in attracting high profile open-top tour operators in the UK and overseas has been a result of the reliability of the system. It is no good having a first class commentary recorded in several languages if the passenger finds that their seat unit is malfunctioning because of waterlogging. In common with earlier v6e systems, all of the electrical components in Sermo have been thoroughly salt-spray tested and most components are gold-plated for additional protection.

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The first customer for the new Sermo-16 system is The Original London Sightseeing Tour, part of the Arriva group, which runs more than 90 open-top buses in the capital. The company was founded 59 years ago at the time of the Festival of Britain in June 1951 and is now the largest and most popular open-top sightseeing bus operator in the world.

Engineering manager Paul Perry points out that a large proportion of The Original Tour's customers are overseas visitors to London and multi-lingual translation is essential.

The company operates two routes, one has a guide and one uses a recorded commentary, but all the buses in the fleet are multi-functional and can be used on either route.

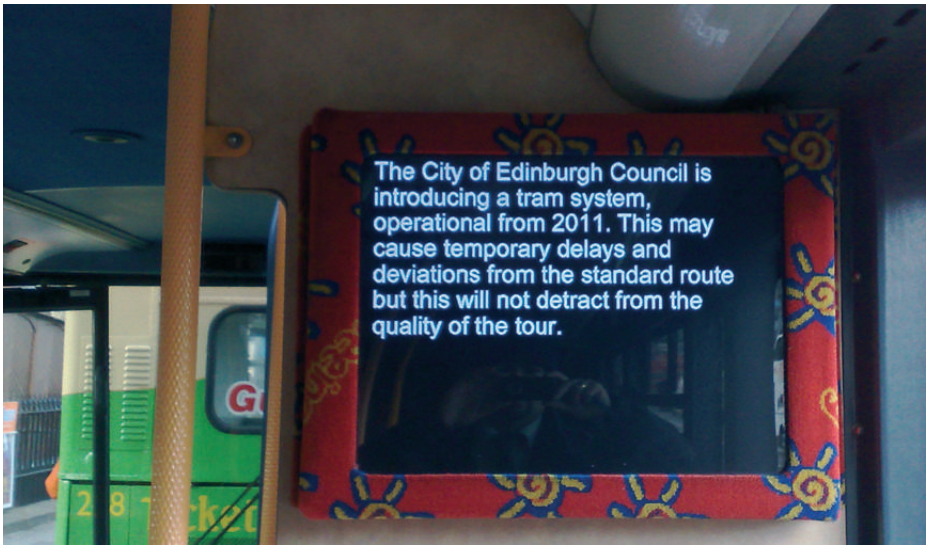
The Original Tour has ordered a number of Sermo systems, which will be retrofitted into existing open-top buses in the fleet.

"We are currently using an analogue commentary system that we developed ourselves about ten years ago," says Perry. We need something that is very robust and also gives us options to develop in the future.

"We have had L-Verbum on trial for some time and it has proved so reliable that we are now looking to fit the new v6e product as our system of choice."

The new Sermo system has the capacity for up to 16 languages. At the moment The Original Tour uses eight languages as standard. "The increased capacity of up to 16 will be a benefit as we will be able to add more without having to choose to drop one of the existing languages," adds Perry. "For instance, Chinese is a language we might want to add in the future."

Another benefit that Perry has found from the L-Verbum trial is the statistical monitoring package, which will also be available on the new Sermo. "Until we used the v6e product, monitoring of the user



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data was a lot harder. Their system makes it very easy to check which languages are used on each bus, and how often. It's a very good tool."

The monitoring of user data is also important for Dublin Bus, which is another user of v6e systems. It runs 23 open-top Dublin Tour buses with a mix of live guides and multi-lingual commentary in ten languages: Irish, English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Polish, Japanese and Chinese. The main tour has been operating for more than 20 years and includes 23 of Dublin's major attractions, including Dublin Zoo, Trinity College (home of the Book of Kells), the Guinness Storehouse, Temple Bar, Dublin Castle, Old Jameson Distillery and the Writers' Museum.

Dublin Bus uses a number of Vocis systems and has also taken two L-Verbums specifically in order to monitor the use of different languages on its tours.

The data extraction features have been further advanced with the launch of Sermo, which includes a new flash card unit that simply plugs into each seat unit to extract all the usage data. The output from the data collected is produced as an Excel-compatible file for easy analysis of how many times each seat unit has been used, and which languages have been played. It provides very valuable data for tour planners and managers and can help feed into marketing initiatives aimed at customers from specific language groups. The introduction of the new seat data units followed a request from another v6e customer Big Bus, which has L-Verbum units on its London, Dubai, Shanghai and Hong Kong tour buses.

The commentary for the v6e systems can be fully-customised by the operator. Recorded commentaries can be added or updated using a simple piece of software, which allows the dropping in, or amending of content at specific commentary points on the tour. The pre-recorded commentary, and all the translations, then play at a specific point according to the timeline set by the operator.

What happens in the event of heavy traffic or diversions? Simple, says The Original Tour's Perry: "Our drivers will be able to adjust the commentary sections to match a revised route and they also have a number of fill-in sections that can be played if there is a delay because of congestion between the commentary points".

And a further option that is available is a GPS unit to trigger the commentary sections at precise locations along the route.

The GPS facility was first introduced with the L-Verbum system and is now available on the original Vocis systems. Scott says that it is a feature that is now attracting increasing interest among customers and potential customers in the UK, Europe, the Middle East, Far East and North America.

Of course GPS requires a good satellite signal to operate effectively and there can be difficulties with this in some heavily built-up areas. To tackle this, v6e's on-board GPS is backed up with a dead-reckoning system including a gyro sensor and a link to the vehicle's tachograph to capture speed data. This enables the vehicle's precise location to be identified even if the GPS signal is too weak. Scott points out that the dead-reckoning system will take over if the GPS signal is weak and it will be able to calculate the precise position of the vehicle, even if it is travelling in tunnels or an underground car park and out of GPS coverage for around a mile or more.

To demonstrate how easy it is to set up a GPS-based tour, Scott has produced a short

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video in conjunction with v6e customer Lothian Buses. The video is available on YouTube and shows how the GPS system can 'learn' a route in a single journey, including any possible diversions that are needed. Simply by using a flash card, the tour can then be loaded onto other buses with all the commentary points correctly triggered at precise locations.

The system can incorporate a trigger radius for each timing point to avoid any clashes with other commentary sections and it is also possible to have fillers pre-loaded to run, for instance, at a low vehicle speed to deal with delays caused by congestion. All of the GPS-triggered timing points can be edited by the tour manager and then uploaded to each vehicle by means of a flash card.

The GPS system provides a detailed route map on the driver's screen, including the locations of trigger points and potential diversions.

The GPS option is another aspect of the v6e system that interests Perry. "We have carried out some experiments with GPS," he says. "It is certainly very useful to have the facility and it is something we may look at implementing in the future."

With customers in Edinburgh, London, Glasgow, Shanghai, York, Egypt, Las Vegas, San Francisco, Dublin, Dubai, Belfast and Hong Kong, v6e has been successful in its core open-top tour bus market but it also sees potential in other sectors that may use multi-lingual commentary. "Boat tours are an obvious candidate for our system," says Scott, "and we also think it could work well for the coach tour market." □

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