

# METROPOLITAN MISSIONS

Metropolitan Express Transport Services has grown steadily since its latest partnership structure was formed but the company does not intend to become another Toll or Linfox.

Ruza Zivkusic-Aftasi reports

**M**etropolitan Express Transport Services founder Tony Van Keulen has one regret since establishing his company in 1986 — not having met his equal partner and Director Sam Pantou earlier.

Pantou, who joined the company 14 years ago to manage finances and sales, has helped transform the business from a casual-hire company to a dedicated carrier in the steel and construction industry.

The privately-owned company, which comprises working divisions of couriers, taxi trucks, construction and warehousing, has grown from 12 vehicles and eight subcontractors to 170 vehicles, 33 trailers and 170 pieces of equipment.

It has survived a 50/50 split in ownership and management in 1995.

Van Keulen says the first partnership, which lasted for 10 years, was split due to a “different philosophy”, and was soon followed by a second partnership which was dismantled when the other director fell ill.

Pantou joined the company 14 years ago as a minor shareholder and three years later bought half of the company.

Van Keulen says their partnership is successful due to Pantou’s sales experience, having previously worked at Australia Post. “Obviously Tony’s got a few more years on me as to experience and he’s got a strong background in not only operations but accountancy, so I think it’s a good mix for both of us,” Pantou says.

They pride themselves on their personal customer relationship, which they describe as open and transparent.

“We go out and visit our customers on a regular basis, when we’re negotiating things it’s us at the negotiating table along with our managers,” Van Keulen says.

“We know our customers intimately.”

## SAFETY FIRST

Seven years ago, they decided to put health and safety at the forefront, updating vehicles every six years. The move has seen their insurance premium drop by 20 percent in the last two years.

From courier vans to rigid crane trucks and semi-trailer tautliners, the company uses Iveco and Scania trucks and puts safe work practices as their top priority.

Tony Van Keulen (left) and Sam Pantou



**“WE KNOW THAT IF THIS DEVICE WAS AVAILABLE TO SOME OF THE PEOPLE WHO HAD DIED IN THE PAST, IT PROBABLY WOULD HAVE SAVED THEM.”**

“The proof’s been in the pudding; we have had a significant decrease in incidents — we weren’t the greatest at securing safe working practices as we had a number of drivers report injuries.”

Pantou says the initiative follows a cultural change in the transport industry as more companies demand safety when signing up a contract.

“We can’t afford to make mistakes; we’re in our customers’ faces every minute of the day. Our reporting process shows them the audit we do of vehicles and maintenance and we have an open book policy with our customers, we show them when the vehicle has been serviced, how many times and what was done.”

“That is a contributing factor to why we’re successful, we tell them everything we do and how long a vehicle takes at each site.”

It’s a big change from the way the company used to operate 15 years ago, he adds.

“To stay ahead of the game in our business, there’s no room for shortcuts on servicing the vehicles because people have woken up now, they will go to the driver and ask them. We just have to make sure that everything we do

**Pantou says a cultural change in the industry has more companies demanding safety**

and say is being done because our drivers will bring us undone.”

A driver support team was introduced two years ago and is aimed at experienced drivers providing support and training to those with less experience. Pantou says the aim is to decrease the replacement of drivers, and make the workforce more secure, which has already shown positive results.

“The days where we throw the keys to somebody and say ‘jump in the car and deliver the load’ is way gone,” Keulen says.

“You put people under stress and you’ve got a \$400,000 asset, plus the steel and the load — there are all sorts of pressures.

“We recognise that now and we’re taking our drivers through the process, they begin at the lower levels and have a career path with each of the positions including a slight increase in pay.”

The recent unveiling of specialised forms of load restraint called fall prevention safety system (FPSS) in Melbourne is a testament to their safety focus.

The system, which took five years to make in consultation with engineers at Vawdrey Trailers, provides a working-at-heights safety tarping solution for flat-top rigid and semi-trailers, doing away with the need to supply safety platforms.

The trailer curtain can be activated by the driver and has minimal impact on the load capacity of the vehicle. Its inbuilt safety barrier encloses the entire work area, leaving no risk of falls when adjusting material or equipment.



Pantou says the pair plans to take the system overseas.

“The industry is screaming out for something like this and we’re proud to say we’re the one that have instigated something like this,” he says.

“We know that if this device was available to some of the people who had died in the past, it probably would have saved them.

“With the trailer, you don’t need to reposition the load every time when you’re going into a different loading bay.”

The idea came to fruition because truck drivers aged between 45 and 49 years are most at risk of falling from trucks, according to WorkSafe Victoria.

Those driving semi-trailers face a greater threat of falling and sustaining injury, with a total of 2,311 injury claims recorded within the freight industry since 2008. Some 603 of those involved a truck driver falling off a truck.

Those injured were away from work between four to 13 weeks.

With the average age of a truck driver being 47 years, the pair says those injured were older drivers that were close to retirement.

“The workforce is becoming a little bit older and, at one stage, we had some managers on board that weren’t focusing on the way they went about employing people,” Pantou says.

“This is not an easy job, it is very tiring and, at the end of the day, employing people that are 60-years-old to try and operate lifting steel or crane steel is too old.

“We’re trying to employ younger people without trying to be discriminative.”

**OPERATIONS**

The company’s warehousing division has grown from 929 square-metres to more than 9,290.3 sqm today, and has up to 10,000 racking spaces, providing a complete logistics service.

Van Keulen says the company’s courier service is different from its competitors’ as it is based on service, not volume.

“One of our major clients for a number of years has been the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority — we deliver to every school in Victoria and every night pick up documents from every school so the commencement of marking can start straight away,” Van Keulen says.

“Now they’re able to release results in December for a simple reason.”

The company was awarded the BlueScope Steel Contractor Outstanding Safety and Environment Award for 2011 in August, which recognises the company’s focus on safety during a period of three years.

It also rewards the company’s safety outcome, having achieved a deliver in-full, on-time (DIFOT) of 99.9 percent or greater for 11 of the last 12 months with BlueScope Distribution at the Westall site.

The company has recently invested in five

new Mercedes-Benz Actros 2644s, carrying pipes from Iplex Pipelines Australia in Albury to Melbourne and into New South Wales.

The pair describes the industry as competitive, saying anyone can enter it.

“There are plenty of entrepreneurs out there who have set up transport companies and, unfortunately, there [are] many who fail on a regular basis,” Van Keulen says.

“I wish we took this approach a little bit earlier — if we’d got Sam 10 years earlier we’d be 10 years further advanced.

“It’s never too late and that’s why we continue doing what we are doing and it’s an exciting industry — it’s not one of those things that stops, there’s a lot of innovation that can still be brought to the industry and the industry is very much alive and it’s where you want to take it,” he adds.

“If you want to sit still you’ll obviously fall away but if you’re active and passionate about what you do, you can stay ahead of the pack.”

The pair is ready to expand in Perth and Sydney but can’t go into the details of their move, only to say their growth in Perth is a “done deal”.

With expansion in sight, they have no plans to become another Toll or Linfox, Pantou says.

**“WE GO OUT AND VISIT OUR CUSTOMERS ON A REGULAR BASIS ... WE KNOW OUR CUSTOMERS INTIMATELY.”**

**Van Keulen describes the transport industry as competitive**

“We don’t want to become that size; we want to become a strong, little personalised industry and maybe have a construction business around all states,” he adds.

“When you get to a point when you’re Toll and all that, you lose that company philosophy that we want to have, which is personalised service and if you get too big we can’t offer that service.” ☒



The company has grown to have a fleet of 170 vehicles, 33 trailers and 170 pieces of equipment