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Now part of AssetCo Group, UV Modular is looking forward to growth and development, with new contracts and an emphasis on continuous improvement, as Ruari McCallion found out

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year, it announced two major contracts for the design, construction and supply of its familiar ambulances. A two year deal, worth £4 million in the first year, with the North West Ambulance Service Trust renews and extends a successful relationship that saw the company deliver 45 vehicles during 2007-8. Looking further north, UV Modular's relationship with the Scottish Ambulance Service NHS Trust seems to be blossoming. It previously supplied the Scots with passenger transport service (PTS) van conversions in a £700,000 contract; it has now signed up for an £8 million partnership for the provision of ambulances across Scotland. The company has been responsible for the design and conversion of almost all frontline vehicles in service in Scotland over the past four years; the new contract is initially for two years, with the potential to extend for a further 24 months. Naturally, UV Modular's managing director is delighted and believes it vindicates the company's ongoing strategy.

"This contact win demonstrates that even within today's tough economic conditions, there is a market need for specialist technology and integrated vehicle design and build solutions," was his reaction to the Scottish announcement.

Based in Brighouse, West Yorkshire, UV Modular is a specialist vehicle builder, focused on the design, development, manufacture and supply of ambulances and personnel transport systems for the healthcare market. It was originally created in August 2002 from the merger of UVG with Modular Ambulance. UVG had longstanding expertise in the use of fibreglass technology in ambulance construction; Modular's speciality was in the building of demountable aluminium vehicle bodies. The new company was immediately in a strong position, with a 65 per cent share of its market and every intention of building on their individual strengths to create a stronger whole. Its progress took a further significant step when it was acquired towards the end of 2007 by AssetCo Group, which has a strong reputation in fire and emergency vehicle management. The increased financial strength means that the company can raise its sights even higher than an internal border within the UK, to export markets in the wider EU.

So, what goes to make a company successful in the health and emergency vehicle market? Well. experience. for one thing. While UV Modular was established only seven

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important, too – but most of all, its products have to meet stringent standards and be delivered to customer specifications, when expected. If they maybe exceed expectations, so much the better.

UV Modular can boast a characteristic that looks to be unique; the company and its 200 employees are totally dedicated to the local authority and emergency sectors. That has enabled it to build up a deep understanding of its customers' needs, from the immediate client right through to the end-users: emergency patients, paramedics and drivers. An ambulance will undoubtedly be a reassuring sight if you or a relative should ever come to need one but it won't be much use on its own if it isn't able to deliver the right help, quickly and effectively. So UV Modular's salespeople are equipped with the right skills and understanding to work with customers and guide them through new innovations, regulations and developments.

One of those relatively new areas is CEN (European standardisation) compliance. It's a development that has been welcomed by UV Modular, as it has eliminated grey areas and helped to move the market forward in terms of safety. The company works closely with the VCA, the UK's designated vehicle type approval agency, and with DPTAC (Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee) and MIRA (Motor Industry Research Association) to ensure that its vehicles exceed not only current standards, but pending safety legislation, also.

All of UV Modular's vehicles are based on Mercedes Sprint chassis, which are often bought by the local authority and then sent to the company for modification. The Modular is described as a big, tough, well handling vehicle. Its demountable body is made of aluminium, with a flat floor, patented tail-lift and external lockers. The body is crush-tested to 10 tonnes and contains a risk-assessed interior featuring a bespoke design to cater for customers' needs. Premia is a spacious vehicle, which is again designed to handle well on the road. It has a streamlined body to improve performance and reduce fuel consumption, features a patented step ramp, has integral lighting and sliding side saloon doors, for ease of access. It comes with a seven-year anti-corrosion warranty and it, too, has been risk-assessed.

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Treka 24 carries (you've guessed it) 24 people. Full DPTAC versions are available; they both have underfloor lifts, which in the case of the wheelchair accessible Treka 24 comes in a choice of designs. The flat floor has no wheelarch intrusions, which means that no-one draws the short straw when it comes to access and comfort. The body frame is made of aluminium and features antiburts, double-action rear doors.

A recent addition to the range is the fully DPTAC-compliant Cura. It's a smaller vehicle, with two rear and four front facing seats.

What all the UV Modular vehicles have in common is attention to detail. The health services, in this country and around the world, have faced a problem with hospital-transmitted infections, such as SARS and MRSA. When The Manufacturer spoke to UV Modular in 2005, it was already putting a strong emphasis on anti-infection. The company installs filters to ensure nothing escapes or enters the vehicles through the air and it has worked with its GRP suppliers to produce a surface that will reject and kill bugs, including MRSA. It also makes recommendations to users for safe practices in operation to reduce cross-contamination, such as restricting access to the vehicle and protocols when operators change shift, for example.

Modern medical equipment is heavy. While items like defibrillators have been made lighter and easier to use, no-one has – so far – come up with a better way of containing gasses than large metal canisters. An ambulance has to carry a range of treatments for emergencies, from drugs to hardware, and they have to be transported to the scene of an accident whether they are actually needed at that site or not. The challenges of total weight, and its distribution, are met by UV Modular's team of dedicated engineers and designers, who optimise the layout using Navigator 3D CAD/CAM. The program enables a virtual reality vehicle to be built on screen, with every component to be used – right down to the smallest washer – captured on the database. Each item can be put in place on the screen and assembled in virtual reality up to the contract's specifications. When weight distribution and ergonomics have

been checked and passed, Navigator automatically produces a bill of materials (BoM), which enables purchasing departments to get to work on ensuring all components are

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When it is time to build, three production lines at Factory One produce seven frontline A&E vehicles and four Mobility Buses each week, from single-shift working. Factory Two produces all the GRP components for both emergency vehicles and buses; it also houses the development department.

It's all pretty advanced stuff and has justifiably helped UV Modular to its leadership position, but it doesn't end there. The company is committed to continuous improvement. Because of the nature of its business – low-volume, highly specialised – it's unlikely that it could ever get to full just in time delivery from its supply chain of specialist vendors but it continually strives to reduce inventory and improve effectiveness. It has introduced 5-S and lean manufacturing tools, with the recruitment of specialists and assistance from external consultants. It also focuses on raising skills levels, through the recruitment of apprentices who undergo a rigorous pre-build educational process followed by hands on experience working with the most highly skilled members of the coach building team. The company has established a manufacturing improvement team (MIT), which works with key operators to ensure processes are adhered to, quality is maintained and provides ongoing support in problem solving. It also deals with initial organisation of the line and sets standard hours.

UV Modular is continually looking for ways to improve safety, comfort and efficiency, for passengers and customers alike. Four years ago, it set a target of £30 million annual revenue in five years; it has already achieved that. Customer satisfaction is paramount and UV Modular believes its ongoing development program and commitment to outstanding safety and performance will keep the company at the forefront of its industry.

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