Virtual Airline CEO Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in our VA CEO interview for the Virtual Airline List. Depending on the editor this word document it will be published on the social network and our website:

Please take your time answering the questions.

1.   Can you tell us a bit about yourself? For example; how old you are, what your background with flying in general is and what brought you to creating your own Virtual Airline.

I'm Chris, I'm 29 and I've been flight simming since MSFS98. I've held senior positions at various FS organisations so you may have seen my name before; I've painted and scheduled for several virtual airlines, hold a VATSIM C1 (CTR) controller rating and previously served as Regional Manager and ATC examiner at two other ATC networks. My day job involves copywriting and graphic design. My life is very busy but I hope to complete a PPL or microlight licence at some point.

2.   When did you start your Virtual Airline?

We opened Star Wars Day, "May the 4th be with you" 2013! Although we started working on some of the ideas that would become Intercity back in 2010.

3.   Do you consider your Virtual Airline successful?

Very much so; we wanted to create a simple-to-use but realistic virtual airline with first rate technology and that's what we've done. Initially I wanted the virtual airline to be "all things to all men", a super-carrier with a huge fleet and hubs around the world but it's difficult to motivate yourself to finish work that doesn't really interest you, by refocusing on what we'd fly ourselves (flights under 2 hours in Europe using complex addon aircraft) we were able to drive things forward and become market leader in our segment.

4.   What is your most interesting experience with your Virtual Airline, what has happened that makes you think so?

Gambling our entire success on the Majestic Q400! It was released just a month before we opened but I'd spent many months prior scheduling over 600 flights for it, it was the majority of our operations. We were hopeful it would be good but had concerns about its uptake in what is traditionally a jetliner-centric community. Fortunately it was fantastic and we were able to "ride the wave" with our pilot roster growing in-line with Majestic's Q400 popularity.

5.   Did you have any bad experiences with your Virtual Airline?

Myself and Chris made most of our VA mistakes many years before starting Intercity so we avoided the common pitfalls (trademarks, opening before ready, too many staff, lack of information for recruits). There's just the two of us who created and run Intercity; we have complimentary skill sets so we each have our own duties that don't really overlap.

Perhaps the most frustrating experience was trying to get IVAO VA partner approval as they require VAs to log twice as many hours each week as they have pilots (that would be 1072 hours per month for Intercity!) and the CEO needed a PP or ADC rating (which meant me logging 25 ATC hours with IVAO). We decided it wasn't worth investing scarce resources to achieve partner status although we still unofficially support our pilots who fly on IVAO.

6.   What do you think of your Virtual Airline's flow of new and leaving VA pilots? Is there something you do to attract more pilots? And why do you think some pilots leave your Virtual Airline?

We have more active users than ever, I think mainly down to P3Dv4 migration coupled with Majestic's competitive pricing on that platform. Recruiting for fictional airlines is always difficult, you must get your name out there and quickly get across what you're about, whereas if you use a real name then their fans will search for you without even knowing you exist! Our website clearly explains what and where we fly and how our software works, and almost everything is available to look at before signing up (even our forums) – there are no secrets or nasty surprises here!

Pilots leaving are a natural thing, their circumstances change so they have less free time, they find a new game or aircraft or airline to interest them, etc. It's tempting expand endlessly and fulfill every request to retain pilots, but continually adding new aircraft types and new hubs is not realistic or sustainable. We're happy for our pilots to fly with other VAs for variety; we stick to what we're famously good at and have relaxed activity requirements so it's easy to fit Intercity flying around a busy life and we send an e-mail reminder to anyone who's not logged a flight for a few months to remind them we're still here! We've had quite a few pilots leave and then return later, which gives us confidence we have a good and interesting offering.

I would like to have more special events and charters, but within our ethos of realistic flights under 2 hours in Europe. Those would provide additional variety and gives us more promotional exposure for recruitment. If a quality modern regional jet capable of steep approach was released that would be a boon too.

7.   What types of planes does your Virtual Airline use and do you have all the custom liveries available for your VA?

I've painted Intercity's livery on to the Jetstream 41 (PMDG), Dash 8 Q400 (Majestic and Dreamwings) and Airbus A319 & A320 (Aerosoft, FS Labs and Project Airbus). We've got a BBS A320 texture half-competed but it remains unfinished as we've had no demand for it. Turboprops especially are much more fun to fly than widebody jets, they have enough automation for one person to cope so they keep pilots continually busy and are very rewarding.

We'd love to add a modern regional jet such as Embraer E2, Bombardier CSeries or perhaps even the Sukhoi SSJ or Mistubishi MRJ but here are no high quality versions being developed for FSX, P3D or XP11. Adding jets in their twilight years such as the BAe 146 doesn't really sit with our realism ethos.

8.   Does your VA fly on a network? If so, what do you think about it? Do you feel it supplements the general flying experience, what do you think of the network in general and is it required for your pilots to fly on this network?

Intercity is "network agnostic"; we don't require pilots to fly online but encourage them to do so, whatever network it is, as we feel it really adds to their experience. We have unique awards for online flying and there's a dedicated online flying leaderboard too. We've been official partner airline of VATSIM and VATSIM Germany for over 4 years now, which means we've consistently meet their quality standards. I think the strength of any network depends on quality and amount of manned controller positions, particularly approach sectors; if you're forced to fly at times there's no one around you might get a better experience offline if you have good AI and ATC addons.

9.   Do you use any flight tracking software? If so, which one, and are you happy about the service it provides? Would you like to improve it for example?

Our ACARS was programmed entirely by my friend Chris and I'm incredibly proud of what he's achieved, as it's unique to Intercity we can achieve a much higher level of integration than is possible with off-the-shelf software such as SmartCARS. Intercity ACARS2 quick and easy to use, thanks to sophisticated automation you only need to input your user details and pick a flight number, it'll work everything else out automatically and requires no input between engines start and engines off. There are intelligent anti-cheating features so we can be sure all hours are logged fairly. It even updates itself automatically.

But it's more than simple flight tracking; it's integrated with SimBrief to provide operating flight plans and loadsheets, and it will use that data to calculate reference speeds and weights. It can also send the Simbrief plan to VATSIM.

It's basically a one-stop-shop. It displays the latest news, shows awards earned and being worked towards, allows the logbook to be reviewed.

10.   Do you make use of the offers some developers / distributors have for Virtual Airlines? Do you think these developers / distributors have good offers? And does it fit your Virtual Airline policy?

Yes, ever since we opened we've been chasing exclusive discounts for our pilots, in addition to posting information on relevant product offers. We've got tie-ups with UK2000, Aerosoft, FS2Crew and Vroute. We'd like to see more offers for scenery related to our hub airports outside the UK (Dusseldorf and Milan Linate) because the developers would sell more copies whilst my pilots save money, so everyone benefits. Aircraft discounts would be great but they're practically unheard of!

11.   Does your Virtual Airline have a custom made internet web page or do you use, for example, PHPVMS and equivalents? Are you happy about your VA's web page?

Our back-end systems were also developed by Chris and he's continually added to them. This allows us to have seamless integration, so login details for the website, forums and ACARS are identical which helps encourage participation. The news articles posted in the forums feed through to our main website. The skin that sits on top is starting to look a little dated now (it's not mobile friendly) although it remains very easy to navigate.

12.   And lastly, what are your expectations for your Virtual Airline in the coming twelve months?

Some of our pilots are dabbling with Xplane11 so we've started work making ACARS2 fully compatible with it. Depending on uptake we'll look to repaint popular Xplane11 addons such as the FlyJSim Q400 and A320s from JarDesign and FlightFactor. I very much hope to make Intercity multi-platform.

We're also hoping to appoint an Events Coordinator who will organize charters and special events.

Please send this questionnaire to admin@va-list.com so we can review it and post it on the Virtual Airline List and social network.

Kind regards,
The Virtual Airline List team