

THE UBER FOR HELICOPTERS WOULD REALLY LIKE AN ENDLESS SUMMER

News / Business aviation



Making Blade more than a well-branded novelty is a challenge when it's based on seasonal travel behaviors.

— Jason Clampet

“The under-34 crowd is a large part of our customer base, and I often ask them: How do you pay for this?” says Rob Wiesenthal, chief executive officer and founder of [Blade](#), a 15-month-old service that connects travelers to helicopter and seaplane flights. “And I have had someone say, ‘Well I have a summer share and this gives me six extra hours each weekend, so to pay for it I go to my mom’s house for Christmas, instead of Acapulco with my friends.’”

Until recently, Blade’s success relied on that summer share contingent—Hamptons beachgoers willing to pay the \$375-to-\$1,250 to skip traffic on the LIE—but with a \$25 million infusion of cash from investors, including IAC’s Barry Diller and Google’s Eric Schmidt, Wiesenthal is looking past the South Fork.

His investors “didn’t invest in a Hamptons company; they didn’t even invest in a Northeast company,” Wiesenthal tells us in an interview earlier this week. “We see significant growth opportunities elsewhere in the U.S. and abroad.” For the time being, however, the former chief operating officer of Warner Music Group (he left that day-job in June to run Blade full- time) remains vague about where those opportunities might be. Until it announces otherwise, the core of the company’s service zones remains popular vacation destinations among the East Coast elite.

Brand Blade

Currently, Blade offers three kinds of trips. There are ride shares, by which people can buy seat on a helicopter or seaplane to various points in the Hamptons, Fire Island, Nantucket, and Martha’s Vineyard; “Bounce,” a helicopter charter, starting at \$895 (for the entire six-seat helicopter), that takes travelers from New York to its surrounding airports; and a charter service, “Blade Anywhere,” which allows people to rent entire helicopters or planes and fly, well, anywhere—so long as “anywhere” is a northeast vacation destination such as Fishers Island, Newport, or Cape Cod.

Blade doesn’t own any of its aircraft. It behaves more like a concierge, connecting affluent travelers with private helicopter and seaplane operators. What Blade does own, however, is a spectacularly comprehensive brand identity.

In the Blade lounge (black walls, black bar, black leather couches) at Manhattan’s East 34th Street Heliport, the Blade logo could be found everywhere: on windows, walls, glasses.

Inside, a small group (all men) was waiting for an 11 a.m. flight to East Hampton. A woman dressed in the Blade uniform—a white jumpsuit designed by Tamara Mellon that could best be described as sexed-up Amelia Earhart—served white wine in a special Blade sippy cup (also branded) that passengers could take on board.

Then the Blade-branded helicopter arrived. This wasn’t a scheduled flight; someone who wanted to leave at 11 a.m. had reserved the flight for its full cost and then crowdsourced the remaining seats. For every seat that sold, the original passenger would be reimbursed in Blade credits. (On this flight, during the last week in August, seats sold out.) The passengers filed out, climbed aboard, and the helicopter took off. The entire process took around five minutes. Beyond the Beach

Back in the lounge, Wiesenthal, dressed in a beachy orange button-down shirt, white pants, and fabric slip-ons, was sketching out strategy—sketchily. “While air service continues into the fall,” he said, “Hamptons air travel slows down considerably after Labor Day.”

For a company looking to expand, that’s obviously not going to fly. Wiesenthal says that he has several new routes lined up, including flights to two ski resorts (he won’t say which), in addition to potential routes in what he calls “the California corridor.” He also says Blade will “probably” provide flights from New York to the outlet malls at Woodbury Commons in upstate New York during the winter holiday shopping season.

Until all those routes are available to the public, Blade’s core service will be for New Yorkers eager to get away from New York. (The only hard and fast non-vacation destination Blade presently offers is a route to Mohegan Sun, the Connecticut-area casino.)

One crucial part of his company’s expansion, Wiesenthal says, is the simple novelty of getting into the helicopter itself.

“The most common question we get from people,” he says, “is: What’s the most beautiful time to

fly?” Wiesenthal notes that Blade passengers post an average of 12.5 photos on Instagram per flight. “The destination is only part of the equation, because there are less-expensive ways of getting there. It can’t just be about saving time.”

30 AUGUST 2015

SOURCE: SKIFT

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