

Starting out

By Widget Finn

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High-flying operation that speedily found itself in a rich little niche

The increasing hassle of travelling by commercial transport and recent terrorist threats mean that Alexis Grabar and Justine Angelli's business has grown rapidly.

Sixteen months ago they set up Avolus (from the Latin volare, to fly) as a luxury integrated transport provider. If you want to get from A to B quickly and comfortably then Avolus will put chauffeured limousines, private jets, helicopters or yachts at your disposal.

Grabar had 12 years' experience in the aviation industry, most recently as a sales director for Airbus Industrie. Then he took a sabbatical to do an MBA in Paris and Boston, and decided to become an entrepreneur.

He met Angelli, who has a background in IT and marketing, at the Monaco Ball where she was on the organising committee. Together they spotted a gap in the market. Grabar explains: "People were seeking luxury travel for speed as much as convenience. Initially we planned a network of limousines covering Europe for older passengers who were travelling by jet and needed a car at each end. We put £50,000 of our own money into the idea, and spent a year and a half learning about the limousine industry and talking to 15 companies in France, Germany, Italy and Spain."

HSBC gave them an overdraft of £25,000 which enabled them to start marketing, designing the brochure and setting up a website.

Unexpectedly the first calls they received from customers were for private jets. "So we changed the concept very rapidly and decided to have an integrated service of limousines, helicopters, jets and yachts.," Grabar says. "We set up a network of providers, selecting the best in each country, and keeping close to them. We have more than a hundred clients who want transport rapidly, and we need to find the best in terms of price, quality and service."



The private jet set: Alexis Grabar and Justine Angelli

advertisement

An advertisement for Telegraph menswear. It features the Telegraph logo at the top, followed by the text "telegraph menswear". Below this is a stylized illustration of a man's face and a suit jacket. At the bottom, it says "BUY ONE GET ONE FREE".

Top quality software is key to the business. "We know where an aircraft is at any given time. For instance we might need to confirm that there is a jet in Moscow which could fly a client to Nice within a couple of hours," Grabar says.

The client list is evenly balanced between private and corporate contracts, and the requirements are varied. Three golfing friends played on three Royal golf courses in a day, transported by Sikorsky helicopter to Scotland's Royal Dornoch, Royal St George's near Canterbury and the Royal Norwich. A film director was able to tour locations around Europe, while an Eastern European house-hunting entrepreneur flew over Switzerland in a helicopter, identified his new

home from the air, inspected it on the ground and finalised the deal by email on the way home. "Our service has the huge advantage of speed for anyone in a hurry," Grabar says.

He estimates 60pc of business comes through word of mouth. The company is growing fast, with predicted turnover of £4m this year. He and Angelli are aiming for a turnover of £20m before a stock market flotation. Offices in Moscow and Dubai are on the agenda. "Private aviation is growing hugely in Russia, but the challenge is to find the right customers – not the new rich people who are difficult to handle."

There are also plans to change the business model. "We want to move from one-off charters into aircraft brokerage. Some suppliers are asking us to partner them to buy the latest aircraft."