

LAS offers a cure for bad airline service

Drug chain owner's new luxury charter to cash in on Olympics

BY JOHN GREENWOOD

VANCOUVER • There are a lot of reasons for chartering one of London Air Services Ltd.'s swanky new Learjets, not the least of which is that even if you end up in the toilet it may still be one of the most memorable

flights you ever took.

"People laugh when they go aboard but it's got a leather seat, its own desk and its quite comfortable," said Wynne Powell, president of LAS.

Launched in 1999, LAS has established itself as a business jet charter company serving a tiny but lucrative market made up of travellers for whom time and comfort are more important than money.

"We're very customer oriented," said Mr. Powell.

The company — a division of

the H.Y. Louie Group, owner of the London Drugs chain — owns two Challenger 604s, two Learjet 45s, and earlier this week agreed to buy a 19-seater Bell/Agusta helicopter, a state-of-the-art machine with a pressurized cabin that, according to Mr. Powell, will allow LAS to fly passengers, for instance, directly from Vancouver airport to Whistler.

He expects to take delivery of the US\$8.5-million craft two years from now, giving LAS ample time to fine-tune its service

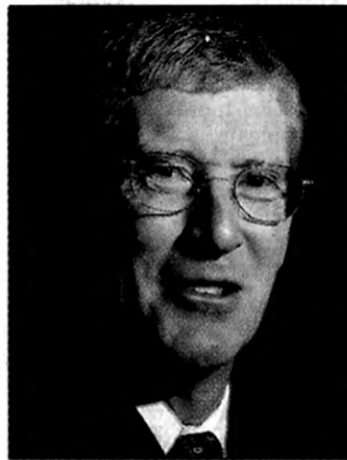
for the 2010 Olympics.

As it stands, the company already offers worldwide service.

Customers range from Hollywood actors and senior government officials to business executives. "We find they're mostly busy people who have time poverty," Mr. Powell said.

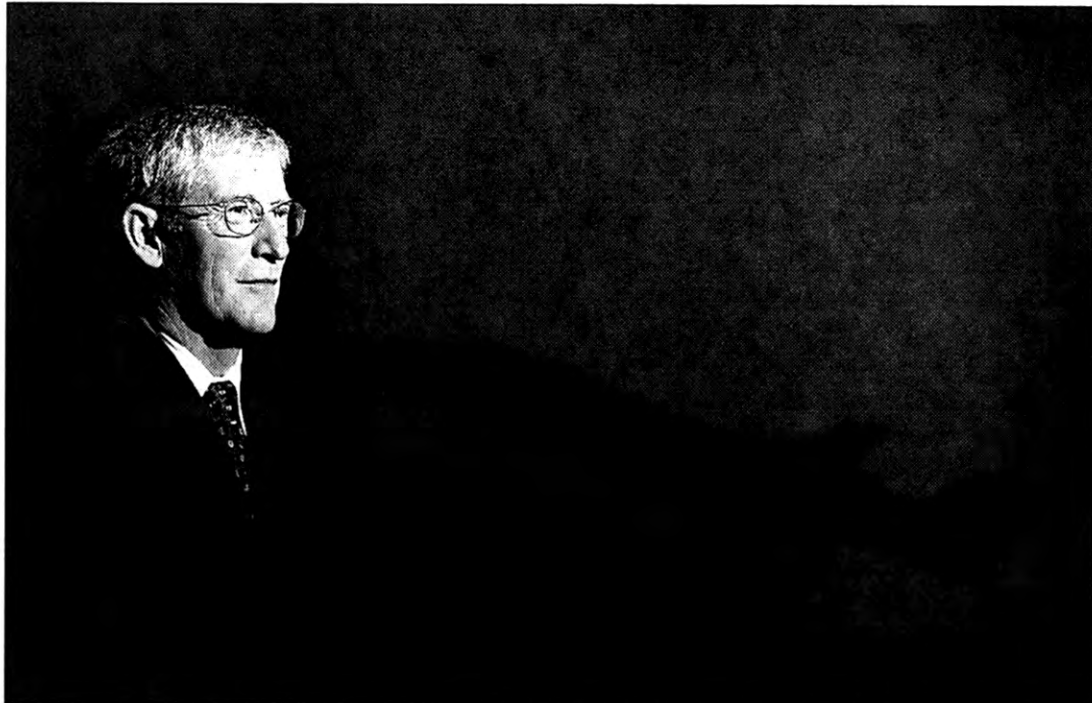
LAS is the latest venture of the HY Louie, the private company of Vancouver's Louie family, whose business empire also includes British Columbia's IGA Marketplace supermarket chain.

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Wynne Powell, president of London Air Services Ltd.



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Wynne Powell, president of London Air Services, brings a strong customer focus to jet charter service.

Service wins out in 'tough business'

LAS

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When H.Y. Louie first launched the service, skeptics argued a drug store operator had no business in jet charter, and the subsequent demise of Roots Air only seemed to add fuel to that argument.

But Mr. Powell sees it differently. London Drugs may be a pharmacy but it is a very successful one, and Mr. Powell believes many of the strengths that helped London Drugs become a dominant retailer can be brought to bear in the airline industry.

"There is no question that this is a very tough business, but it's totally customer driven and we bring a strong customer focus. That is our core competence," he said.

In this business, customers charter the whole jet as opposed to a single seat. A return trip from Vancouver to Toronto on the Challenger would set you back about \$56,684, or roughly \$4,700 a person if you fill all 12 seats. The same trip on the Lear would cost \$30,000, or about \$3,333 a person assuming bathroom occupancy.

Unlike much of the rest of the airline industry, LAS has seen its business improve as a result of some of the recent economic shocks, like the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and SARS, Mr. Powell said.

"You can use video conferencing and the Internet to communicate, but at the end of the day, people still need to travel in order to trade."

One of the advantages of a jet charter service is that customers get to avoid standard airport security bottlenecks like passport control, since most of the administrative work is done by the airline in advance. Passengers need only show up 15 minutes before they're due to leave.

"We know who we're taking so when we go to the U.S. we send all the passport information electronically, which saves a lot of time."

Because the customer basically rents the whole jet, he or she gets to decide when to leave. So if a business meeting ends sooner than expected there's no need to wait for a boarding time — you just hop on the plane and instruct the pilot to head home.

On board comforts abound, including DVD sound systems and full Internet and phone service. Since the Learjet flies at 51,000 feet, well above most larger passenger jets, there's very little turbulence.

"You can put your coffee down, you can run a computer. It's absolutely smooth," Mr. Powell said.

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