

# AMS VANS, INC.

By Bonnie Lewkowitz

*If the high cost of a new accessible van has kept you from making this important—and liberating—purchase, here's your chance to hit the open road.*

THERE'S no arguing that we live in a mobile society where the ability to move about freely is highly revered, and mostly taken for granted. And while the recent attention to fuel prices and the environmental damage resulting from auto emissions may cause people to think twice about jumping into their car for a leisurely drive, the fact remains that we are an auto-dependent country. This cherished freedom is often financially prohibitive to many people with disabilities, however, who use wheelchairs or scooters and require a lift-equipped vehicle—especially those on fixed incomes.



New modified full-size vans with a lift or ramped minivans can easily carry a hefty price tag upwards of \$40-50,000. One Atlanta-based company, Adaptive Mobility Systems, Inc., is motivated to making modified vehicles more affordable to people with disabilities. When Bob Boston, its president and CEO, took over the company in the spring of 2000, he recalls watching a woman leave the store in tears because she couldn't

afford a van. "That really affected me," he says, "and that's when I began concentrating on ways to enable more people to be able to purchase a van."

So how can this company offer modified vans for \$10-15,000 less than most other conversion operations? Boston and his partner Kip Crum—president and CEO of AMS Vans, Inc., which markets the vehicles Adaptive Mobility Systems converts—

let me in on their secret... which, as it turns out, isn't really a secret after all. "Our business model is pretty straightforward," Boston says, "and it just involves three words: strong, safe, and simple."

Founded in 1979 as Handicaps, Inc., which primarily sold wheelchairs and other durable medical equipment, the current name reflects its shift toward vehicle sales, averaging about 50 per month nationwide.

Boston was first hired as a consultant in 1999 to help AMS revitalize its stagnant van sales. The first thing he recognized was that the general market was shifting from buying full-size vans—"the dinosaurs of the industry," he says—to buying minivans, which are more fuel efficient and easier to park in a garage. It was logical to think this change in preference would reach beyond soccer moms, appealing to the disabled market as well. Having more than 30 years of experience in the auto industry modifying and crash testing Peugeots, Citrons, and Jaguars, Boston recognized that he was well positioned to pull together a team of engineers to come up with a better lowered-floor design. With their new design, which includes not lowering the passenger door behind the driver, they became the first mobility company to pass the more-stringent 2010 crash test standards; the industry's federal safety standards. To the layperson this means that the vehicle can withstand a frontal crash at 35mph, one to the side at 33.5mph, and a rear crash at 50mph—up 20mph from the 2008 standards.

When Boston eventually bought the company in 2000 he thought about how the depreciation on a new vehicle was significantly greater than that of a slightly used vehicle with less than 20,000 miles. With this recognition came the first change in their business plan from selling new vans to low-mileage vehicles. They will still sell and modify new vehicles, but the majority of their business involves those that were previously owned. Crum is quick to mention that every van is hand picked, adding that "we won't put anyone in an AMS van that we wouldn't put our own families in."

Vehicles mainly come from Chrysler-approved auctions, and they are considered to be the cream of the crop. These minivans have typically been leased or rented, and they are hand-chosen by AMS to make sure they're in great condition and haven't been involved in an accident.

The second change came when they adopted an "80/20" concept. "We took 20 percent of the items that caused 80 percent of the problems and eliminated them, resulting in a more affordable and reliable vehicle," Boston explains. It was determined that kneeling systems and power doors were causing the majority of problems in the vehicles currently on the market, so they eliminated the kneeling system. To compensate for the change in height they extended the ramp an additional 4" so that, when the ramp was unfolded, there would be a 10-percent incline. That's still steep by some standards, but when lowered onto a curb the slope is minimal.

Most consumers with physical disabilities want power doors, and while many vehicles come equipped with them straight from the manufacturer, AMS has chosen not to in-

stall them in the ones that don't. The reason for this—and the advantage to the consumer—is that, if there were a problem with the manufactured power door, they could go to any dealer or certified mechanic as opposed to being limited to using a mobility dealer which, in some cases, may be hundreds of miles away. Lastly, instead of tapping into the vehicle's computer to run the modifications, they connect directly to its battery to control the system. This philosophy of "keeping it simple" has therefore helped to keep costs down, and as an added bonus the vehicles have fewer mechanical problems.

"Providing a service that makes people feel part of our family is just as important as making the vehicles affordable," says Crum. Admittedly their ramp van conversion system might not be the right setup for everyone, since the system works best when the disabled person is a passenger rather than the driver, but this is where their commitment to excellent customer service comes into play. "We won't sell anyone a vehicle if it won't meet their needs," he continues. "We will work with our customers to determine the best fit for their needs, and our staff is always available to guide them through the entire process, from the initial



inquiry to the actual delivery of the vehicle."

Unique to AMS is their live 24-hour emergency service, which allows customers to contact someone at any time if a problem arises with the modifications to their vehicle. Granted, they might not be able to fix the problem at 2:00 in the morning, but they will arrange an appointment with a certified mechanic for the next day. Since 95 percent of their van sales are conducted via the Internet, they guarantee that if their clients aren't pleased with the vehicle upon delivery, they'll provide a full refund less delivery costs. After five years of providing vehicles in this fashion, however, the company is pleased to report that only one customer has taken advantage of this offer.

"The most exciting part of this business is helping someone get out of their house who might otherwise be unable to do so," Boston says, and Crum agrees. "So if you dream of going places, we dream about getting you there!"

To learn more call (800) 775-VANS, send e-mail to [questions@amsvans.com](mailto:questions@amsvans.com), or go to [www.amsvans.com](http://www.amsvans.com). 