

Hiring a Chauffeured Car Service Provider?

Key Considerations for a Good Business Decision

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Before speaking to any car service provider, assess your organization's major needs around car service. What are your specific points of pain? What are your expectations?

- Are your wait time costs high because your passengers phone for a car early anticipating that there will be delays?
- Is customer service so poor that you are not sure whom to contact when there's a problem?
- Are your passengers complaining about drivers who have communication issues or spend time using cell phones or BlackBerry@s while driving?

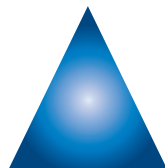
Document your expectations in a Service Level Agreement. Take the time to think through and spell out what your organization expects from a car service provider. Areas to include are provider documentation, invoice processing requirements, vehicle and driver requirements, vendor service requirements, and additional items such as package handling, credit cards, special vehicles, and support for corporate events.

In evaluating your alternatives, the following criteria will help to ensure that you choose a company that has the knowledge, experience, and professional expertise necessary to deliver valuable, long-term benefits to your company. Whether you are looking for a provider to service 70% of your rides or 5% of your rides, consider the following:

1. **Look for a car service provider that is established in the industry as a corporate provider.** Car service is a necessity in many geographic locations, whether your personnel are traveling to client sites or getting a ride home for safety reasons. As such, there is no shortage of car service providers. However, not all car service providers have the expertise and experience to service corporate clients. Aside from asking the provider when the business was established and what is the size of its fleet, ask the ownership type of the company. Know the difference between a co-op and a limited liability firm and how choosing one or the other may impact how the provider will meet your needs.
2. **Ensure the car service provider is financially stable and adequately insured.** As you would with any prospective significant supplier, ask for financial statements and analyze long term financial viability. More importantly, you are putting your employees in the hands of this company. You are responsible, legally and ethically, to make sure the car service provider is adequately insured. Look at their workers' compensation status, employer's liability coverage, comprehensive general liability, comprehensive automobile liability, and excess or umbrella liability. Ask the provider's internal process for validating driver's insurance status. Store copies of the provider's policy, with your company as a named additional insured, and update the file on an annual basis.
3. **Ask for a program tailored to your firm.** Do you need a line of vehicles outside of your building day and night? Are most of your rides for commuting in the evening? Do your passengers frequently make reservations during the day? Are your employees going to the airport frequently? Describe your unique needs and location to the car service provider and request input on the best solution for your needs. The car service provider may suggest staging cars nearby or having a dispatcher in the lobby to help individuals locate their vehicles. Gauge the provider's expertise and willingness to work with your unique requirements.
4. **Look for an implementation philosophy and internal processes that focus on partnership and continual improvement.** Ask how many corporate customers the company has, and how many are long term. How do the companies rate their program and what is the average rate of service failures? Gather details on driver training and safety programs. Understand the provider's dispatch process and how this may affect availability and timeliness of cars.
5. **Understand the leadership and customer care philosophy of the company.** Ask how the provider supports you as the customer. Will their executives participate in meetings and quality reviews? How often? Do their executives have hands-on experience and expertise to understand what your organization is trying to accomplish? Is there a single point-of-contact? What is the escalation process?

6. **Analyze the rates.** Understand that rates are only one factor in selecting a car service provider, but can have a major impact on the level of customer service that your passengers receive as well as the availability of cars. Drivers are most often independent contractors who are affiliated with a car service provider. They choose which ride to service and the rate that you are paying will affect that decision. Compare the rates of different providers that you are considering, and balance this with your service expectations.
7. **Assess the technology capability of the car service provider.** Your company will want to be as productive as possible when reviewing and accepting invoices from the vendor. As such, require your car service provider to send your invoice electronically. Many companies also provide employee information and charge numbers for the provider to be validated at the time a ride is requested. Ask what dispatch system the provider is using. Is it homegrown or off the shelf? What is the provider's capability to give you the information in the electronic format that your request? Is the provider willing to invest resources to complete your request?
8. **Ask where your firm fits into their client mix.** The amount of attention that you get may be directly related to the amount of business that you send the car service provider's way. Determine the volume of rides that you are targeting for this provider. Share this information and ask where this projected volume will put you in their client list.
9. **Look for references that mirror your situation.** Ask for references that you can call at your discretion, so you can get a customer's perspective of the provider's ability to provide quality services. This list should include companies whose specific business needs closely mirror your own, along with a brief synopsis of each relationship. Call many of them. Ask them to rate the provider against others that they have used in the past. Ask them if they plan to continue the relationship with the provider, and if they would hire the firm again, given their experiences.
10. **Set up a trial.** By this point, you have determined provider differentiators and are ready to make a decision. Select a variety of passengers who enjoy evaluating new services and are willing to take the time to provide feedback. Set a trial period of 30 to 60 days, depending on how often these individuals use car service. Know that the car service provider will be focused on giving you exceptional service during this period. A trial will give you the opportunity to let the provider earn your business while highlighting any potential areas for improvement.

Lastly, since you are taking your time gathering information about providers, ask for their perspective about what is going on in their industry. This gives you the opportunity to gain valuable knowledge that may impact your program in the future. It may be that state or local legislation is changing or you may learn that demand is low so you have a better negotiating position. Whatever you learn, know that you are following a solid methodology for moving your ground transportation program forward.



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