

A company that speaks its customers' language

Tony Partridge got his first taste of travel by buying lost luggage. Now he returns it through his multi-lingual information, emergency and lost luggage service **CallUma**. **Juliet Dennis** reports

A year ago few in the trade would have heard of CallUma.

The 24-hour worldwide multi-lingual help service launched to the industry in March last year, is now used by The Co-operative Travel, Expedia, lastminute.com and easyJet.

In January the company's profile was raised when former lastminute.com managing director John Bevan joined as a non-executive director.

In a move that could see the service rolled out across high-street agencies, founder Tony Partridge is in talks with TUI Travel, Thomas Cook, and Advantage. Two operators are understood to be on the verge of signing up.

The timing of the trade launch of the company – which offers an emergency and information phone and text service as well as luggage tracking – could play in its favour, with failures such as the XL Leisure Group and the recession encouraging holidaymakers to be prepared for emergencies.

These conditions have made the company more attractive,

confirmed Bevan. "In tough times people are more aware of what can go wrong," he said.

Similarly, as companies cut back on out-of-hours services to reduce fixed overheads, he hopes this will provide a gap in the market.

He adds: "We have had a lot of interest from online travel agents because they are more aware customers are going to look to them for help in the case of bonding. Agents who dynamically package are responsible for customers out of hours."

Partridge is adamant CallUma's text service could help the trade in future 'XL situations' by delivering information quickly to a large number of people.

The business

The company has 700 homeworkers employed as interpreters and covers more than 20 countries. Backed by private investors, including former Orient-Express Hotels president Simon Sherwood, it pays 20%-40% commission to agents.

As well as its Pass The Phone multi-lingual assistance

and Tag'n'Traq luggage tracking service, CallUma offers to store copies of personal documents such as passports and insurance policies. New services include alerting customers that their balance is due and sending a text message three months before their passport expires.

Partridge said its Just Text Help service allows customers to phone or text 'help' for assistance. "Travel companies are trying to cut back on resort and out-of-hours staff. They see us a back-up," he said.

The Co-operative Travel has



offered CallUma's Just Text Help in a white-label service to customers and branded luggage-tracking tags.

Expansion plans

CallUma is only available to UK customers, but Partridge said interest in the service from Spain, Portugal and Canada

could lead to expansion in other overseas markets.

In the UK, it also has plans to work with mobile phone providers to offer multi-lingual help to travellers attending the 2012 Olympics in London.

Partridge adds: "There will be two million people coming to the capital for the Olympics and we have spent more than £2 million on a system that will allow every nationality coming into the UK to have access to help in their own language."

While "significant" expansion plans are in the pipeline, the short-term goal is to get more tour operators and airlines to sign up to the service.

Bevan believes the service could reduce travel insurance claims by reducing the amount of lost luggage and could cut call centre overheads by offering an out-of-hours emergency service.

To read the full interview go to www.travolution.co.uk

