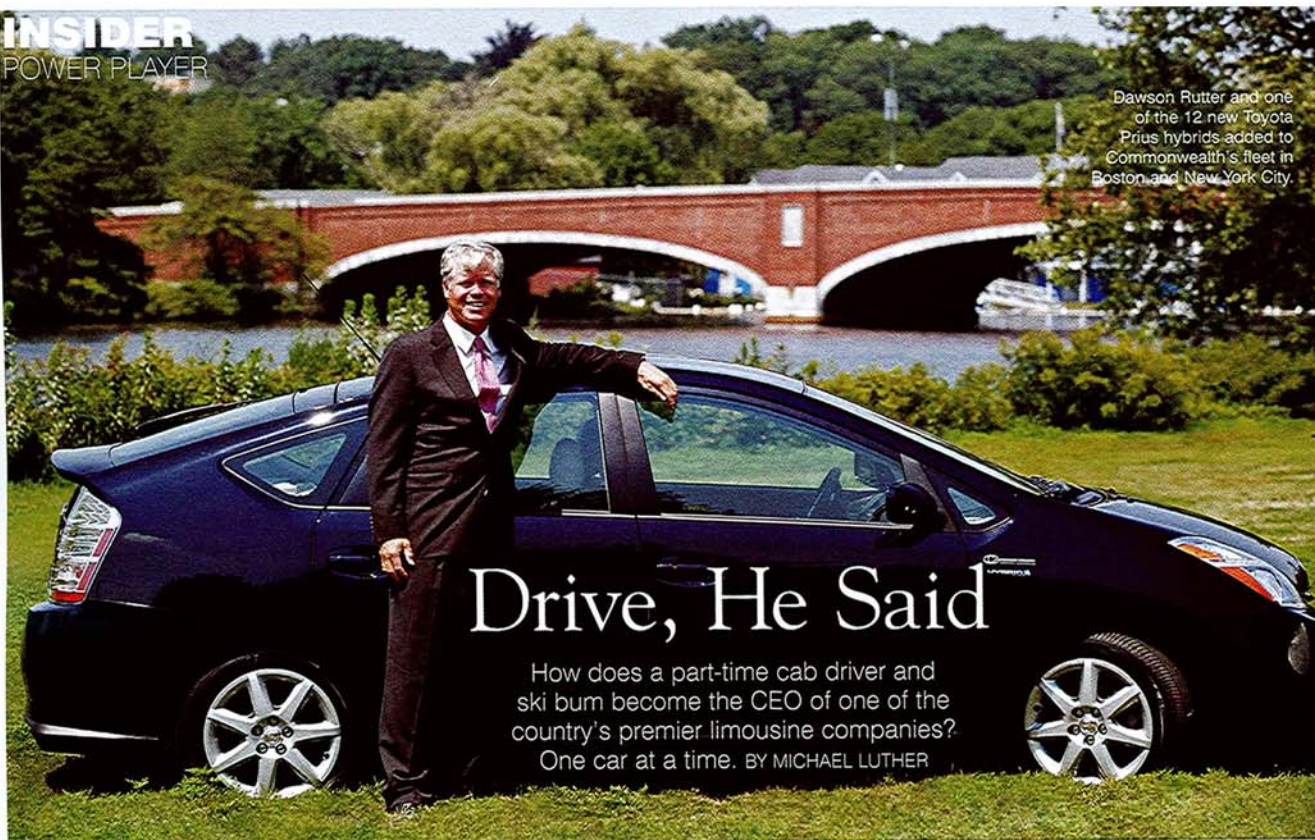


# BOSTON COMMON

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INSIDER  
POWER PLAYER

Dawson Rutter and one of the 12 new Toyota Prius hybrids added to Commonwealth's fleet in Boston and New York City.



## Drive, He Said

How does a part-time cab driver and ski bum become the CEO of one of the country's premier limousine companies?  
One car at a time. BY MICHAEL LUTHER

CONSISTENCY MAY BE THE HOBGOBLIN OF A LITTLE MIND for some, but certainly not for Dawson Rutter, CEO of Commonwealth Worldwide Chauffeured Transportation. Consistency is, in fact, his corporate byword, the business mantra that's taken his service company from the two-car, Boston-only operation it was in the early eighties to the 190-car fleet serving the Hub and New York City that it is today.

While a handful of companies dominate the limousine business, there are thousands of independent owner-operators across the country, which brings up the issue of competition. Rutter says Commonwealth has been successful *because* of the competition. "We're an employee-based limo service, selling against that independent owner-operator, and so our service *has* to be better," he says.

His top selling points are Commonwealth's consistent on-time record, clean cars, and professional chauffeurs, whose navigational skills get customers where they need to go. "We always arrive 15 minutes before pickup time, and it keeps the customers satisfied," he says.

Proof of this satisfaction is apparent on the company's website, Commonwealthlimo.com, where testimonials from longtime clients run side by side with accolades from the business media. For example, *LCT (Limousine & Chauffeured Transportation)* magazine, an authority on limousine-chauffeured transportation, ranks Commonwealth as the fifth-largest limo business in the US; *Inc.* magazine named it the 52nd fastest-growing American inner-city business.

While Commonwealth expects to hit \$50 million in revenues this year, the firm didn't have a meteoric rise to success, and, in fact, Rutter's story has a somewhat longer arc. More than 25 years ago, he was driving a cab in Boston, alternating between the life of a ski bum in Alta, Utah, and summering on Martha's Vineyard. In May 1982, Rutter wrote his original business plan—to have five cars and get friends to do the driving. By the following spring, Rutter had his second car and had been in the chauffeur business for 10

months, with early customers ranging from Sophia Loren to Art Linkletter. Rutter managed to increase his fleet to 20 cars and the staff to 30 by 1990. Today Commonwealth Limousine has 190 cars and 320 employees, including those in New York, which the company began servicing three years ago and which now boasts a 90-car fleet.

"Our drivers aren't cabbies," notes Rutter, adding, "they're career chauffeurs who are valuable team members and who take the customers' experience to a higher level." To get to that level, the drivers receive extensive on-the-job training. They're coached in everything from how to greet a passenger and introduce themselves to how to handle the door and the trunk, as well as how to make the customer comfortable, how to speak, how to judge the rider's mood, and even whether to talk to the client.

Commonwealth's fleet includes a bevy of luxury vehicles, such as Lincolns

*"Our drivers aren't cabbies. They're career chauffeurs, valuable team members who take the customers' experience to a higher level."*

and Mercedes, which accommodate up to 13 passengers. Most exciting, perhaps, is the new line of hybrid vehicles it offers for environmentally conscious customers. Over the summer Commonwealth added Toyota Prius hybrid vehicles to its fleet, six each in Boston and New York, and a FlexFuel Suburban, running on 85 percent ethanol and 15 percent gasoline, is also available.

"There's a lot of lip service paid to customer service, but without it, the customers end up unhappy, and that's a killer for any service business," says Rutter, who knows his customers demand the best—which is why they eventually say, "Why did we wait so long to make the change?" ♦