



Choosing a Manufacturer

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You'll make many critical decisions along the way to establishing your mobile healthcare program, but you're going nowhere until you determine which vehicle to buy and who to buy it from.

Getting the latter right will go a long way toward making sure the former turns out well.

The good news is that you have many choices when it comes to vehicle manufacturer. But that can also be bad news, as not all manufacturers are equal.

With that in mind, we've aggregated the knowledge of experienced mobile healthcare practitioners to help you become the smartest vehicle shopper you can be.

Here, then, are four guidelines to keep in mind when choosing a manufacturer for your mobile clinic.



1. YOU MAY NOT BE READY TO CHOOSE A MANUFACTURER

Far be it from us to slow your roll, but one of the best ways to ensure you pick the right manufacturer has nothing to do with the manufacturers themselves. Rather, it has to do with how well you have established the key elements of your program. So ask yourself the following questions about these crucial aspects:

- **Utilization:** How many people — from drivers to providers to patient registrars— will staff the clinic at one time? How many clients will be visiting at one time? How will everyone navigate the space? Will that change, say, depending on the weather?
- **Services:** What are your exam areas/tables/chairs/equipment needs? Do you need a vaccine refrigerator? Connectivity for an EHR? Special power considerations?
- **Environment:** Will the vehicle be operating in extreme climate conditions? High altitudes? Strong winds or a copious amount of dust?
- **Schedule:** Will it be a daily operation? Weekends only? How many hours a day? And how far will you be driving?
- **Special requirements:** Do you need a wheelchair lift? Plumbing fixtures?

[Note: Our Mobile Healthcare Program Start-Up Guide — available to members — offers further guidance for developing models of care and service.]



PRO TIP

To ensure that you consider everything that needs to be considered, survey all relevant stakeholders about their expectations and requisites.

WHAT COULD GO WRONG

Mobile healthcare vehicles are complicated machines; no matter how much consideration you put into the purchase, you're bound to have some issues with the vehicle. While most are surmountable, some result in lasting trouble. To help you avoid them, we queried our members about their biggest frustrations with the process and finished product. Their most common complaints:

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1. YOU MAY NOT BE READY TO CHOOSE A MANUFACTURER (cont.)

1. Poor craftsmanship
2. Design miscalculations (especially re: patient flow, staff functionality)
3. Delivery delays
4. Mechanical failures (including generator)
5. Slow response when troubleshooting

Only after you have clearly defined your program and its needs are you ready to look for manufacturers who can make the vehicle that fits those needs.

2. YOU MUST DO YOUR HOMEWORK

There are three practical ways to narrow the universe of manufacturer options:

1. Ask for **recommendations from operators of clinics** who provide services similar to what you intend to offer.
2. Review the **Mobile Healthcare Association's list of member vehicle manufacturers** (and service providers), available on our website.
3. **Hire a consultant** to help with the buying process, including the preparation of your RFP. (The Mobile Healthcare Association can help find the right independent expert for you.)

PRO TIP

There's every reason to do your due diligence because not all manufacturers create equally. Leaky air conditioners. Improper wiring. Shoddy suspension. The list of potential problems goes on but proper vetting will help you avoid the most common issues.

Armed with a clear understanding of your operational needs and a robust set of at least three vendors, you're now ready to issue your RFP.

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2. YOU MUST DO YOUR HOMEWORK (cont.)

MAXIMIZING YOUR RFP

An adequate RFP will get you what you have to know about a vendor's qualifications, process, expected timeline, and projected costs. A more savvy RFP will elicit insights into less-obvious but no-less-important areas of interest. These include:

Compliance. Are they familiar with all government regulations that pertain to your specific program and location? If not, how will they school themselves?

Design. What is the process? Is it a custom build or retrofit? On a commercial or RV chassis?

Manufacturing. Are there regular opportunities to see progress? How often can you expect to hear from them during the build-out?

Generator. What type of generator do they use or recommend?

Delivery. What are the logistics? Is there an added cost?

Support and training. Can you see the warranty agreement? Do they offer training? If yes, does it cost extra? Is there ongoing technical support and more general customer service? How does it work?

Referrals. Will they provide a list of customers you can speak with? Have they created a clinic for a program near you? If they offer to pay for a factory visit, would they exchange that for a visit to an operational clinic that they built?

Once you start fielding responses, the real work begins. That work can be described in eight words: **Learn from those who have come before you.**

For sure that means you should **reach out to at least three clinics** that have purchased a vehicle from each of the manufacturers you're thinking about doing business with.

Then, if at all possible, **visit at least one of those clinics.** It's worth the price of a plane ticket and hotel room to be able to check the quality of the product firsthand. Vehicles cost hundreds of thousands of dollars; spending a fraction of that upfront will be a smart investment.

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2. YOU MUST DO YOUR HOMEWORK (cont.)

Here are some questions to ask along the way:

On the build-out experience:

- Overall, how did you like working with the manufacturer?
- Did they help you think through issues and provide smart recommendations?
- Were they responsive to your requests?
- Did they provide initial schematics and drawings?
- Did they make the delivery date?
- Were they consistent on cost?
- What would you have done differently?

On the user experience and aftercare:

- Is the vehicle meeting your needs?
- Is it a comfortable space?
- Is it challenging to drive?
- How is the suspension?
- Is the electrical system reliable?
- How is the connectivity?
- Is the cabinetry well-made?
- Has there been issues with the warranty?
- Has the manufacturer provided necessary technical assistance?
- Do they continue to be responsive?
- Would you buy another vehicle from them?

PRO TIP

Many manufacturers will pay for your travel to visit their plant. It's worth the trip, but not just for the reason they have in mind (i.e., to impress you with their operation). Go also to pick the brains of their experts and to initiate relationships that will be useful if you buy from them and need assistance down the line.

3. YOU NEED TO ACCOUNT FOR NUANCE

It's worth noting that mobile clinic vehicles might well cost more and custom builds take longer than you might expect. It is equally important to note that each purchasing circumstance is unique, and that inevitably affects the buyer's perspective.



\$430,000

Average cost of a mobile healthcare clinic vehicle in the U.S.



12-18 MONTHS

Average time between purchase and delivery for a custom mobile healthcare clinic vehicle

For some, a manufacturer that delivers a vehicle faster and cheaper will be a good thing, because getting the clinic on the road at an affordable price is most important. For those especially interested in a longer life for their vehicle, though, spending a little more money and waiting a few more months makes far more sense. In the end, what matters is that what you get is what you need.



PRO TIP

Some programs will face specific pressure to complete the purchase of their vehicle by a given date. But it's often possible to work with a manufacturer to secure title before your vehicle is delivered, thus satisfying any proof-of-purchase requirement. While not an arrangement to include in your RFP, it is something you can discuss with potential vendors.

4. YOU NEED A PROCESS FOR MAKING THE FINAL CALL

Sooner or later, you'll need to make a choice. No matter how thorough your due diligence or comprehensive the RFP, the decision will ultimately come down to some version of trusting your gut (or guts, if more than one person is involved). But if there's no foolproof way to ensure the right call—and there isn't—there are a few ways to make your gut a little more reliable:

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4. YOU NEED A PROCESS FOR MAKING THE FINAL CALL (cont.)

1. Make a case for and against each finalist. The act of arguing against a choice helps avoid normal biases.
2. Allow stakeholders to vote anonymously. This helps to avoid any groupthink or boss-pleasing tendencies.
3. Consider a less-than-ideal future. Imagine your program a year in and two or three negative situations that might arise — service disruptions, say, and the reputational damage from them. Then ask the team what tradeoffs could be made in the choosing process to prevent them. This will crystallize any nagging but vague doubts you are having before it's too late to address them.
4. Pay careful attention to red flags. Sometimes one or two negatives can outweigh a whole lot of positives. Here are a few issues that should give you serious pause:

BUYER BEWARE

- ❗ **Is the manufacturer only providing old references?** You want multiple references from clinics who have purchased a vehicle within the last three years.
- ❗ **Are they asking smart questions that lead you to refine your vision?** Good vehicle makers will play 20 Questions (or more) because they're just as anxious as you are about missing something.
- ❗ **Do they "get" seemingly minor but actually crucial issues such as connectivity** (don't let them tell you that you don't need rooftop antennas), **heating and cooling** (these vehicles need insulation and, in hot climates, several AC units), **and antimicrobial surfaces** (critical for sterilization)?
- ❗ **Do they seem overconfident?** These vehicles are a challenge to build. Experienced vendors know this and will be careful to temper optimism.



Review Quiz

- 1. The best way to ensure you account for all operational circumstances and requirements of your clinic is to:**
 - a) Think long and hard about it
 - b) Ask ChatGPT
 - c) Survey all stakeholders
- 2. To assemble a list of potential manufacturers you might:**
 - a) Hire a consultant
 - b) Ask the Mobile Healthcare Association
 - c) Ask operational clinics that offer the same services you will be
 - d) Any or all of the above
 - e) None of the above
- 3. The due diligence gold standard for choosing a vehicle manufacturer is:**
 - a) A comprehensive Google search
 - b) Calling three clinics who have used the manufacturer and visiting one in person
 - c) Scouring each manufacturer's website
- 4. Possible red flags include a manufacturer that:**
 - a) Gives referrals for vehicles built more than three years ago
 - b) Suggests one AC unit is always sufficient
 - c) Asks no questions about your needs
 - d) All of the above

Answers:

1. c, 2. d, 3. b, 4. d