

Kalitta takes off for corporate charters

Willow Run stalwart feels the economy's bumps but keeps landing business

BY RON LEUTY
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Doug Kalitta — pilot, nationally ranked drag racer and owner of air charter business Kalitta Charters — feels the need for speed. And he's trying not to let the economy slow him.

In the wake of flat revenues, 120-employee Kalitta Charters, operating from Willow Run Airport in Ypsilanti Township, is promoting its corporate passenger charter business. At the same time, the company moves auto parts for the Big Three and operates an air ambulance service.

"We're diverse enough that if one slows down, the passenger or medical will be up," Kalitta says. "They don't all seem to go real slow at the same time."

The air charter business thrives on shuttling groups of executives to and from business meetings without the inconvenience and downtime caused by overnight stays. A group of four or five executives could travel between Willow Run and Cincinnati, for example, for about \$3,000 on Kalitta Charters.

Yet the company's revenues, which Kalitta won't disclose, are down overall from five years ago. "Travel is down in general," he says. "I think we're seeing

the impact the same as the commercial airlines."

That affects the charter business as well as the air ambulance service, he says, because if fewer people are travelling, fewer will need to be hospitalized while on the road.

Kalitta Charters owns 26 aircraft. Connie Kalitta, Doug's uncle and a one-time top-ranked racer himself, founded the company with one plane in 1962. It had some 3,500 employees and more than 100 aircraft, but was sold off over the past few years.

After the sale, Doug purchased back the division that Connie originally started.

And Doug Kalitta himself doesn't appear to be slowing, which he credits to a strong team at the airline and at the track. At the same time, his family is growing — his wife, Josie, is expecting their second child this month.

Kalitta has raced for 16 years, the last five-plus years on the National Hot Rod Association's drag-racing circuit.

During the racing season, Kalitta leaves Willow Run on Friday afternoon for qualifying runs at drag-racing tracks from Pomona, Calif., to Las Vegas to Gainesville, Fla. The team



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"We're diverse enough," says Doug Kalitta, owner of Kalitta Charters in Ypsilanti.

uses Kalitta Charters planes. "I get back by 6-7 p.m. on Sundays and I'm back to work on Monday," Kalitta says. "It's a pretty normal week."

The race team is owned by Connie Kalitta, who also owns Kalitta Air, a worldwide cargo operation that flies into Kuwait and has been cleared for flights to Iraq.

"Connie makes pretty much all the decisions tuning-wise about how the car runs," Kalitta says. "As far as learning aviation and the racing, you couldn't ask for someone with more knowl-

edge about both."

Plus, Doug Kalitta says, it's good to have someone with the knowledge of how to balance work and racing.

But Kalitta's biggest thrills come on the track.

"The only other comparison is on a cloudy day skimming the tops of the clouds at 500 miles per hour," Kalitta says. "It's the same sensation of speed that you would get in the drag car. There's nothing like leaving the starting line. Nothing copies that experience."

Ron Leuty is the editor of *Business Direct Weekly*.