

THE INFLUENCER

PROFILE: **ASHVILLE AGGREGATES**

Ashville Aggregates' boss Daniel Louisy has been proactive in expanding his business, while embracing the benefits of social media, as he bids to become master of his own destiny

WORDS: WILL SHIERS / PHOTOS: TOM LEE

Commercial Motor "Usain Bolt could tell me what training he does, but I'm not going to get any faster, especially not at my age!" says Daniel Louisy, the 38-year-old boss of London-based Ashville Aggregates. "Likewise, Anthony Joshua can show me what he's doing, but that doesn't mean I can do it."

Louisy is responding to our suggestion that Ashville Aggregates' massive social media presence might be assisting its competition. "I know it's frowned upon to show people what you're doing, but it doesn't bother me. In fact my only regret is that I didn't start sooner," he adds.

We're not just talking about a few hundred followers here. The company's YouTube channel has 180,000 subscribers, and the *Ashville Weekly* bulletins frequently get in excess of 250,000 views. More than 1.5 million people watched his *A Day in the Life of a Construction Entrepreneur* episode, and 238,000 tuned in to see him crash a brand new Mercedes-Benz Actros demonstrator into the back of a VW Golf. "Mercedes aren't actually talking to me at the moment," he admits.

So why do so many people watch every week? Well it helps that it's entertaining, and that frontman Louisy is charismatic, outspoken and extremely



In the spotlight: Daniel Louisy's weekly bulletins on social media often get more than 250,000 views

likeable. But the main reason why it's such compelling viewing is simply because this self-made boss has a great story to tell. After all, there aren't many companies that can boast of expanding from zero to 35 trucks and a railhead in just seven years.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

"We're builders by trade," says Louisy, talking to us and his full-time videographer, who is filming the interview for the next *Ashville Weekly* episode, "and were doing bathrooms, extensions, kitchens, lofts



and basements.” He explains that on one occasion in 2013 he had a team of men digging a basement in south west London, but they had to down tools because the skip was full, and there was no sign that it was about to be collected.

“So there were 10 fellas in the basement, everyone sitting around smoking cigarettes, and I said ‘why aren’t you digging?’, and they said ‘how can we when the skip is full?’” he recalls. “So the next day I decided I’d had enough, and said I’m getting a lorry.”



By his own admission, Louisy knew nothing about trucks, but that wasn’t going to deter him. After a little bit of advice from friend Aidan Kavanagh from Harrier Grabs, and his soon-to-be fitter Noel Wright, he purchased himself a used DAF CF85 8x4 tipper grab. “Aidan bought DAFs, so I bought one too,” says Louisy, explaining the thought process behind that first purchase.

Running a lorry proved to be a lot more complicated than he’d expected, and looking back he describes the experience as “a baptism of fire.” It didn’t help that he didn’t have his HGV licence when he bought the truck, so had to learn rapidly.

“I used to drive the lorry, and then pull over and use the laptop on the passenger seat to run the business. I was learning as I was going along. It was difficult, but I managed to navigate my way through it,” he says.

Having invested in a lorry, suddenly the

Taking the initiative:

Louisy expanded his equipment portfolio rapidly to overcome operational issues



company found itself with very few basements to dig. So, Louisy went looking for work elsewhere. “I knew who my building competitors were, as I would see their names on tenders,” he says. “So I went to them all and said ‘I can’t beat the others on price, but I’ll be there when I say I’ll be there.’” This approach worked, and one tipper-grab very soon became three tipper-grabs and a tipper.

“Then Wandsworth banned grabs from taking out of skips, and I began to lose work,” remembers Louisy. “So we started buying skip lorries too.”

This was quickly followed by another change in direction. “We would arrive at a job only to be told we couldn’t load as a concrete lorry was there, and that the concrete lorry was more important. So we bought a volumetric concrete lorry! So then

“**I used to drive the lorry, and then pull over and use the laptop on the passenger seat to run the business**”

we had a concrete lorry, grabs, tippers and skips,” says Louisy. “But then when we turned up with the concrete lorry, people were telling us that the pump wasn’t there, so we’d have to wait. So we bought a pump too.”

A pair of 4x2 grabs were soon added to the fast-expanding and increasingly varied fleet, allowing Ashville to operate in some of the mews and narrow streets of Chelsea. And more recently the company made the move into artic tippers, with the purchase of a pair of Scania XT R500 6x2 tractors with Kelberg tipping trailers.

WALKING THE LINE

But there was still one serious hurdle to overcome, as Louisy explains: “If we priced a job, and two

other competitors priced it, I would end up having to use their sand. And they would invariably say ‘we ain’t got no sand! I would say ‘I can see sand over there’, and they’d say ‘that’s not for you, that’s for a special job’. I kept coming unstuck. People would just keep backing me into a corner. I needed a railhead.”

Louisy tried for his first railhead four years ago in Park Royal, but although Network Rail was impressed with his tender, he was unsuccessful. “Truth be told, it was probably a bit early,” he admits now. The experience allowed him to build up relationships within Network Rail, which came in handy when he attempted to reinstate a defunct railhead at his current West Drayton site. The premises had previously been occupied by Aggregate Industries, but the track had been covered over. Louisy decided to sit his landlord and Network Rail around a table to discuss reopening it. On this occasion he was successful, and in July 2019 the first train rolled into Ashville Aggregates. As well as being a great move for his company,

COVID-19 STRUGGLES

“Covid has been a rough road,” admits Daniel Louisy. “My 60-tonne Liebherr arrived here just as the first lockdown started, and we didn’t see a train for 12 weeks.”

Ashville Aggregates continued working throughout the initial lockdown, with 40% of the truck fleet operational. “A driver in a truck and a man in a machine are both self-isolating. I found work for any of my drivers who wanted to keep working. I don’t quite understand why quarries shut down,” he says. Obviously, Ashville Aggregates did introduce Covid-compliant safety measures in communal areas.

Another change brought about by lockdown (and the temporary closure of fitness centres) was the building of a homemade gym at the West Drayton site. Fabricated out of scaffolding poles and planks, Louisy says it helps him to de-stress.

Louisy sees the railhead as being positive for both the economy and the environment. “If a man has a million tonnes of stone in Cornwall, and he can’t sell it, then why not bring it here by rail? Every train takes 120 lorries off the road,” he says.

Ashville currently receives three or four trains a week, pulling 22 carriages, each loaded with



“ Within 10 years I would like to have our own train, and our own quarry ”



75 tonnes of product. *Commercial Motor's* visit coincided with the arrival of 1,650 tonnes of 6C fill material, all destined for HS2. Ashville has just four hours to unload each train, or face a heavy fine. But so far this hasn’t been a problem, due to Louisy’s pride and joy - a £480,000 Liebherr LH60 clamshell - and its skilled operator Wayne Inkpen.

When the trains started to arrive, it became immediately apparent that additional trucks were needed. More 8x4 tippers were added (see box-out overleaf), taking the fleet total to 35. And there are more on order for delivery later in 2021.

PLANNING AHEAD

Louisy is one of the most driven and ambitious people we have ever interviewed, so it comes as little surprise when he tells us that this isn’t the end of Ashville’s expansion plans. “I have some magic numbers in my head in regard to the fleet size,” he announces. “And within 10 years I would like to have our own train, and our own quarry. So if we are at this location, I would like the other end [of the railway line] to also be ours too. We’d be the masters of our own destiny.”

He also has plans to step up his social media presence, which he considers to be a significant string to the company’s bow.”





ASHVILLE TIPPER

Although it is still running its original DAF and Volvo tippers - expertly maintained by Noel Wright - these days Ashville Aggregates tends to only buy Scania. "They're a good truck, and the drivers really like them," says Daniel Louisy.

The trucks are typically taken on four-year hire purchase deals through Scania Finance. "Scania understands our business," he says. "The head of credit comes down here, sees what's going on, realises our potential, looks at my sums and appraisals, and gives us a thumbs-up." He has eight 8x4 tippers on order now, an even mix of XT P410s and low-entry L-series. All will be fitted with Abba bodies, Louisy's bodybuilder of choice.

"Abba let me design the truck on a computer," he explains. "I said 'a bit higher here, a bit less there, chequer plate here, a step there, an Easy Sheet here, a toolbox there, levers on both sides', and so on. I basically custom-designed an Ashville lorry to my exact specification. It took a long time to do, but now it's like a conveyer belt. I just need to say 'Ashville spec'."

All new tippers are specified with Scania's City Safe window in the nearside doors, or 'London doors' as Louisy refers to them. "I do everything I can to make them as safe as possible."



Dismissing our suggestion that the YouTube videos are little more than an unnecessary luxury, and unlikely to actually win Ashville Aggregates any work, Louisy says: "I used to spend a lot of money on Google AdWords, but at £5 per click, what's that actually doing for me? My competitors would click continually, and run up a bill for me. Instead of spending that money with Google, I'd sooner invest it in my business." He continues: "These days, when the phone rings, they don't say 'I found you on Google'. Some people might say 'I saw one of your lorries', but most say 'I watched one of your videos'. Obviously there are people watching it all over the world, and I'm not going to deliver a skip to New Zealand, but we do get work as a result. We have so many avenues now. So if somebody calls about concrete, I'm talking to them about skips and grabs, and if they call for a grab, I'm talking to them about skips and concrete. I don't want them to go anywhere else."

TOP PERFORMER

Louisy reminds us that unlike many of the operators whose stories we cover on the pages of *CM*, he's not second, third or fourth generation, and didn't have 30 years of clients already on his books.



"You have to work to your strengths, and this [YouTube videos] is one of mine," he says.

At the start of our interview, Louisy made reference to the fact that he wouldn't be able to perform as well as top sportsmen from simply watching them in action. That might be true, but it's not going to stop him from trying to emulate Tiger Woods. "I'm planning to play golf with a VW Golf," he reveals. "I'm going to dig a hole, and use the LH60 to swing a bucket into the Golf, and hopefully score a hole in one!" You know where to go to watch it, and likewise, if you want some concrete... □

GOT WHAT IT TAKES?

Ashville Aggregates (and sister companies Ashville Inc and Ashville Concrete) currently employs 59 people at its 3-acre West Drayton base, but is looking to boost this to 62. In addition to actively recruiting two more full-time videographers, Louisy is on the look-out for a transport manager. "I'm looking for someone who is passionate about working in this industry, and who appreciates the intensity of running 35 lorries. People underestimate the hours they will work. If you think you'll turn up at 8am and leave at 4pm, you're dreaming. It's just not possible to run the fleet properly in those hours."

