

There's a new beach bus in town

Startups kick sand at each other in heated rivalry for Rockaways

BY KEN CHRISTENSEN

Ayo Omojola rode Rockabus last summer, when the now year-old shuttle service began scooping up beachgoers in Williamsburg and dropping them off in the Rockaways. She climbed aboard the big yellow school bus for \$15, and sipped a can of Modelo Especial lager as the driver played radio station Z100 en route.

"I expected more for what I was paying," Ms. Omojola said of the BYOB excursion. "That's one thing that made us do it better."

In late June, the Brooklynite and her husband, Scott Lebowitz, planned to launch their own school-bus turned shuttle service to Rockaway Beach and Jacob Riis Park: NYCBeachBus.

But it could be a hot summer for the company. As the fledgling entrepreneurs vie for weekend travel-



ROLLING WITH PUNCHES: Ayo Omojola and Scott Lebowitz's new NYCBeachBus faces intense competition as it tries to win market share from Rockabus.

BUCK ENNIS

ers to fill seats, they're rolling onto rival territory, a mere block away from Rockabus under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, and billing themselves the "affordable" option.

From yoga to happy hours

The husband-and-wife team posted fliers at the competitor's location last month, and someone

promptly tore them down. Ms. Omojola tweeted a photo of the act with a caption that read: "@rockabusnyc hides their head in shame."

"I can understand the frustration," she said recently, "but when you rip down our posters, it seems like you can't handle the competition."

NYCBeachBus' guerrilla marketing campaign also includes placing comments on Rockabus riders'

Instagram photos to advertise the carrier's service, while one of the duo's friends has advertised on their behalf in the comments section of articles written about Rockabus, Ms. Omojola said.

Rockabus co-founder Sam Morrill said in an email, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, right?" He declined to comment on Ms. Omojola's tweet and her accusation.

"This isn't the first time someone has tried to copy Rockabus, and probably won't be the last time, either," Mr. Morrill added. "We're super-happy with the level of service that we provide, and we're confident that our customers feel the same way, since our ticket sales have never been better."

On a recent weekend, Rockabus sold out seats on all its buses, including those picking up at a new location on Manhattan's Lower East Side, Mr. Morrill said. The company plans to begin pickups in Brooklyn's Grand Army Plaza this summer, near a second NYCBeachBus location at Barclays Center. Mr. Morrill declined to share the company's annual revenue.

NYCBeachBus sells \$12 round-trip tickets that include use of Fris-

bees, soccer balls and other beach toys. Yoga instruction on the beach costs an extra \$7 in advance.

As they have done with Rockabus, businesses near the bus stops have partnered with NYCBeachBus, offering discounts on food and extended happy hours for beach-bound customers.

"We want it to be like a little, fun, magic school-bus trip," Ms. Omojola said. "We want it to feel comprehensive, like a summer day camp."

Big demand expected

The duo has pledged to donate an unspecified portion of profits to Graybeards, a Rockaways nonprofit, and the New York City Parks Department.

If Ms. Omojola and Mr. Lebowitz fill their school buses, the Rockaways could get 132 more visitors—44 people per trip, three trips a day—each Saturday and Sunday. Ms. Omojola thinks there are enough potential customers for the businesses to coexist.

"Not if Rockabus continues to meet the demand that it has this summer and last summer," Mr. Morrill countered. ■

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