

Tale of two cities.

By Don McCurdy



Two stories caught my eye this month for very similar reasons. One, the capital of Missouri no longer has a taxicab company and the other taxicab drivers at Los Angeles International Airport are on strike. Both are totally different stories, except for some minor similarities that seem to be totally ignored.

A line from the Jefferson City, Missouri story caught my attention: “Shortly after, some of the former drivers for Checker Cab bought vehicles from the company in hopes of independently providing taxi services to the community.” Those independent contractor drivers wanted to continue to provide the service as individual taxicab owners. Not so fast. There are regulations that must be complied with in order to start a taxicab service.

The drivers are probably going to try to jump through the required hoops to get started but as of right now there is no taxicab service. Required is a minimum of three vehicles, 24/7 service, etcetera, etcetera. All for the safety of the good citizens, of course. Right now, the good citizens of Jefferson City are completely safe from any taxicab issues.

The line from the LAX article that caught the same eye was: “taxi companies already can’t compete with Uber and Lyft on

the price of a ride, so the new pickup policy introduced in October has exacerbated an unsustainable situation.” Why can’t taxicab companies compete on price? The rates, and regulations, are set by the city for taxicabs, not so for Uber and Lyft.

But wait, there’s more!

According to reports, the City of Los Angeles is considering revamping the city’s taxicab services. While the questions I had didn’t get answered in the article, the current franchise system is being changed to a permit system.

Does that mean current companies just ceased to exist? Didn’t say. They are also moving to central dispatch, though nobody said who is going to administer the central dispatch.

Color schemes are out, decals are in. The details have not been addressed, yet, but the process will undoubtedly take a while to come to completion. Has the city considered the new gig worker laws in California? If the city manages the call center will the drivers then become employees of the city? No doubt a show worth watching is brewing.

The times they are a changing.

Reports are that California is driving change in the way Uber operates in that state. Uber has altered their method of operation in an attempt to avoid the negative ramifications of the state's attempt at garnering employee status for Uber's drivers.

Apparently Uber has not been "lobbying" as much as they did when they were starting up. It is quite apparent that the state is either trying to put their native son, perhaps a neutral pronoun would be better, their native thing out of business or increase the cost of a ride to be easier for the taxicab companies to compete with competing prices. After all, Governor Newsom is the brainchild behind San Francisco's near worthless medallions. Why not even out the misery?

You could make the claim that being employees would make it a better world for the drivers, but you can count on major cuts in available driver slots. One of the changes is to give the driver more information about a possible destination before the driver accepts the ride. The undeniable result of that is poor service.

That's a wrap!

Travis Kalanick is reported to have sold his stock and resigned from the board of Uber. Say what you want about the guy, he and the company he helped create revolutionized on demand ground transportation.

If you follow this column at all you know I was skeptical of Uber's ability to break into tightly regulated markets across the US, but Kalanick pulled it off. His take no prisoners attitude eventually got him in trouble, but he had already changed the world. Now, Uber has near worldwide acceptance on one level or another though it has serious issues. The kinder, gentler management at Uber all sounds good, but Uber has lost a bit of its killer instinct.

Lessons learned.

Uber and Lyft have been experimenting with four digit pin numbers to increase passenger safety, according to reports. The customer gets a pin number which they give to the driver and their phone gets a message saying their ride is verified.

Since Uber already gives the license plate number to the customer, it is questionable as to how this "extra layer of security" is going to help. If you're too intoxicated to look at the license plate are you going to go through the extra steps of "verifying" your Uber driver is authentic?

Forty year ago, as a young taxicab driver, I learned not to ask "are you Maria" to someone getting into my cab but rather to ask "what is your name." For customers concerned that their safety is at stake a simple "who are you here to pick up?" would solve the issue.

If you can't tell me my name, you're not my ride. While I'm not "blaming the victim" I'm simply offering a way to feel safer when getting into a stranger's car. I don't know that Uber or Lyft has developed the ability to have a preferred driver but that would increase a customer's comfort level.

Speaking of which.

A report from Toronto is that an Uber driver terrified his passenger by going double the speed limit and running various stop signs. After calling Uber, the customer received a five dollar coupon, an apology and the promise that she would not be paired with that driver again.

After being contacted by a local television station regarding the incident the customer got a full refund on the fare and the driver was denied access to the app until an investigation was conducted.

While the new, kinder, gentler Uber may be in force it seems that maybe a version of smarter might need to be added to the mix. A person meeting your driver and giving you money is calling to offer you input on the behavior of your driver, PAY ATTENTION. How many driving complaints are enough to get a driver off the system? Do you track that? Is your app the only measure of customer relations?

In my experience there are three basic types of drivers, ones that attract customers, ones that repel customers and ones that just do their bit every day without generating customer feelings in either direction. My mission, as a manager of a ground transportation company, was to send drivers who repel customers to my competitors.

Were it my sophisticated computer system, I would want it to tell me how many complaints a driver had, what type of complaints and the same for the customer. If you aren't going to put a quality product on the street why not pick a different business? If you represent your product as a quality service to the rider and the driver as well then the drivers will take care of business. If they get the idea that nobody is watching they will most assuredly run amok.

If you have any comments regarding this or any of my articles please feel free to contact me at: don@mcacres.com. - dmc