

Use Technology wisely and success will come

Tim Barnes-Clay

TECHNOLOGY IS A VITAL PART of the taxi and private hire business these days. Uber ushered in the most drastic of changes by linking drivers with passengers directly, via a smartphone app. With its simplicity and inexpensive prices, smaller private hire operators and traditional black cab drivers have been left under pressure to keep their businesses operating profitably.

Other firms have even gone by the wayside in a bid to rival Uber. Take Karhoo, publicised by many as a growing adversary to the giant. But in November 2016 the taxi-booking and comparison app called it a day. This might appear to be a warning to other businesses that Uber can't be taken on unless you have got something truly special to offer.

So, now Karhoo hasn't worked, what will? Well, there are many ways to cut a cake, and several companies are perfectly happy with the slice of the taxi market they have. Indeed, the key to success appears to avoid directly competing with Uber. Instead, it's more about the ability to embrace technology and then use it in your own way.

GIG HOT AIR

According to Dr Michael Galvin, Head of Regulatory Affairs at Addison Lee, it's important to forget about the hot air of the so called 'gig economy' and 'sharing economy' disrupters who are "busy pouring other people's money down the drain".

He explained: "Eighty per cent of the industry runs sustainable and profitable businesses. Addison Lee has been at the forefront of using all the latest technological advances for the benefit of customers, drivers, and the environment. Customers can nowadays use our app, the web and our call centre to book a cab."

He continued: "The customer's favourite restaurants, their home, their office, and even their gym are all held on their file. So, booking is easy and quick. They can pay by cash, credit card, Apple Pay, PayPal, or on account. They



Dr Michael Galvin

can choose a standard car or taxi, a limousine, a big car, a green car, or a small car. Customers can also track the vehicle; get a price, and see the driver's phone number, as well as his or her picture. They can also get the driver's licence number and name.

"Addison Lee customers get the bill at the end of the journey and are normally asked to 'rate the driver'. In other words, the customer is in control, in touch, better informed than ever and even asked to evaluate the service," said Dr Galvin.

He continued: "Account customers no longer wade through piles of photocopied paper dockets—they get data, they get reports, and they get analysis. They can control spend, and they can enforce travel policies. If they want to use 10 different companies, they can use a platform to control those companies. The system captures their references, and ensures that every cab used is accountable. Technology has saved them money—and lots of it."

Technology has also assisted the driver hugely, according to Dr Galvin. "Gone are the days where drivers are trying to scribble down an address

as they drive around Hyde Park Corner. Gone are the days of crackly radios, bad signals and dead spots. The driver can now log on during the evening, pick a booking for the next morning and go to bed happy that he or she has their first booking of the day 'in the bag'.

"Satnav has also provided expertise in strange areas—a booking to Birmingham from London is great until you can't find the address in your map book. Lost drivers equal unnecessary mileage, congestion and emissions. Driver pay is viewable on our portal and messages are viewable on the portal as are updates and information."

Dr Galvin added that apps show where the work is—and technology means work is distributed more fairly. "The driver is no longer at the mercy of friendly or unfriendly controllers and dispatchers. There are no more 'false positions', coming in on the wrong call and all the other practices that used to haunt the industry. The environment benefits from drivers being intelligently allocated to bookings. Again, less dead mileage means lower emissions."

BUSINESS SENSE

But does it make business sense? Addison Lee's Dr Galvin claims the biggest challenge the industry had to initially face was how to get a quart into a pint pot. "When radio channels and great dispatchers and controllers were as rare as hen's teeth, how could we get tens, hundreds or even, in some cases, a thousand bookings out to drivers during peak periods?"

He admitted: "The fact is, we couldn't, so we ran late, refused bookings and sent drivers to bookings that ended up as 'scrubs'. The outcome was lost turnover and profit, lost customers, and fed up, hungry, drivers."

He concluded: "Technology based on GPS has enabled us all to grow, to scale up and, importantly, to deliver more cabs on time than ever. Londoners now enjoy great services, even at the busiest of times. Costs are important too—fewer ring backs, fewer queries, fewer complaints and fewer lost customers mean that costs are lower, sales are higher and profits are higher. All thanks to technology."

Apps at the centre of Veezu's development

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RECOGNISING THE changing trends in the UK taxi market, Veezu,

the UK's second-largest private hire operator, has invested £1 million in the development of a state-of-the-art mobile app.

Veezu was formed in 2013 and operates across three regional hubs in South Wales, Leeds and the West Midlands. Owing Dragon Taxis in Cardiff, Newport and Bridgend, Amber Cars in Leeds, and A2B Radio Cars in Solihull, it has a combined fleet of almost 2,500 cars, and transports around 22 million passengers each year.

CUSTOMISE

Veezu's app allows customers to book and order taxis electronically from their mobile devices, store their favourite pick-up locations and set up individual accounts that can be linked to a personal or business payment card. Once a taxi has been booked via the app, customers can track the location of their taxi on an interactive map. This also displays the driver's name, vehicle make, and registration number, and provides a real-time estimate of the car's arrival time.

Corporate account holders can make payments for single journeys by adding a business credit or debit card via the app, or opt for a monthly payment plan. Executive car hire services can also be booked via the app, providing corporate clients with the option of specifying a higher-grade vehicle to transport their staff or customers.

Paul Ragan, CEO of Veezu, firmly believes that in today's mobile-centric world, it's important



that the wants and needs of all customers are catered for as the taxi and private hire industry goes through a period of change.

He said: "With application-only businesses gaining traction across the UK, we wanted to create an app that not only meets, but also exceeds all of the services that global technology businesses are offering our local customers. We believe strongly in localism, and we are clear on meeting customer needs by providing a reliable and safe service with consistent pricing."

IMPACT

Ragan claims that the introduction of the app has had a positive impact in all the regions in which Veezu operates. He claims it makes the process of booking a taxi quicker and easier for lots of customers, as

well as offering the ability to pre-book a journey in advance.

UPTAKE

However, Ragan explained that around half of Veezu's customers are unlikely to use a mobile app to order a taxi or private hire service, but he knows they still expect a fast, efficient and high-quality service. "This is why we have continued to invest in our call centres, as well as the systems we have in place to communicate with our customers and our drivers."

He added that Veezu's mission is to provide a 'best-in-class' service to both corporate and private customers in all the company's regions. "It's only by doing this that we will be able to meet our target of doubling our fleet over the next three years," Ragan said.

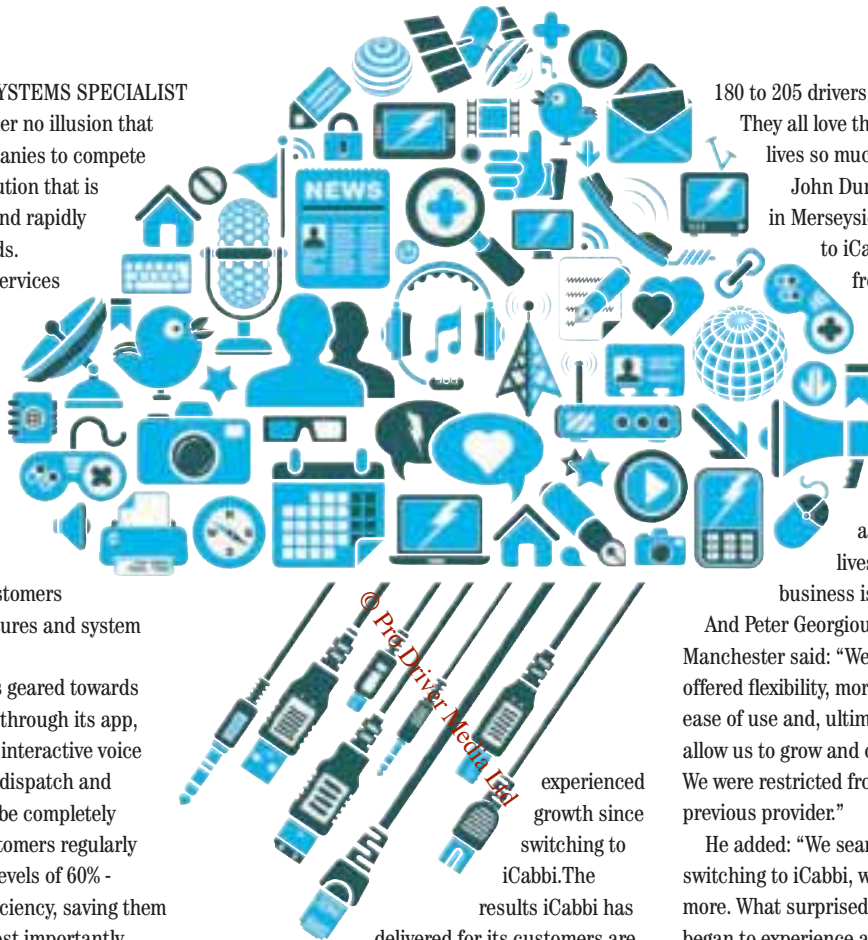
The answer's in the Cloud for iCabbi customers

DISPATCH SYSTEMS SPECIALIST

iCabbi is under no illusion that for taxi companies to compete effectively they need a solution that is innovative, cost efficient and rapidly evolving to meet their needs.

iCabbi's products and services are cloud based, so it can react to market changes by swiftly developing, testing and deploying new features. In 2015, iCabbi released 563 new features across 15 releases, and so far, it's at 201 features across 31 releases—meaning its customers always have the latest features and system improvements.

The firm's technology is geared towards automation, from booking through its app, its web Booker, or through interactive voice response (IVR). Similarly, dispatch and back office processes can be completely automated, leading to customers regularly experiencing automation levels of 60% - increasing operational efficiency, saving them money every week and, most importantly, enabling company owners and management teams to get back to focusing on growing and developing the business. In fact, on average over the course of 2016, UK customers have



experienced growth since switching to iCabbi. The results iCabbi has delivered for its customers are impressive. Tony Abram, of Millers Citax Cars in Preston said: "Since we've added iCabbi's consumer app, our customer base has grown. Thus, we're busier and have grown from

180 to 205 drivers in the last two months. They all love the driver app, it makes their lives so much easier."

John Dunne, of Argyle Park Taxis in Merseyside added: "Since moving to iCabbi we've benefited from the openness and flexibility of the system. We can change settings and make continual improvements to suit our business. As a result, our IVR has gone from seven per cent to a high of 65%. Our drivers' lives are easier and our business is running better than ever."

And Peter Georgiou of Club Cars in Manchester said: "We needed a system that offered flexibility, more control in our hands, ease of use and, ultimately, a system that would allow us to grow and operate from multiple sites. We were restricted from doing this with our previous provider."

He added: "We searched the market and since switching to iCabbi, we have got all of this and more. What surprised us was how quickly we began to experience and benefit from increasing levels of automation. We regularly hit 50% automation now and the app is fantastic—better than Uber."

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AUTO ALLOCATION—LET YOUR DISPATCH SYSTEM DO THE CONTROLLER'S JOB

IT MIGHT SEEM LIKE A NEW thing, but technology has been shaping the taxi industry for years. For instance, dispatch software has been automating operations for over a decade and auto allocation is one of the features that makes Magenta Technology stand out from the crowd.

The pioneer of real-time scheduling, Magenta's auto allocation functionality provides customers with significant competitive advantages.

As you might expect, Torsten Brose, [pictured] Magenta's Business Development Director, backs the views of Addison Lee's Mike Galvin: "As the

private hire and taxi market continues to evolve, the role that technology must play becomes more and more important. Recent market changes—such as the disappearance of Karhoo—may be making people understandably nervous about investing large sums in technology platforms that promise the earth but don't deliver."

He added: "However, technology is vital for getting traction and growing your share within this market. Today's biggest and brightest taxi and private hire operators just can't deliver results and remain competitive without it—I should know as I used to be one myself."



Brose continued: "There are some technologies out there that just

enable you to computerise old school processes," he added. "At Magenta, we pride ourselves on doing things faster, better and smarter, which is probably why that's our business strapline. Our smart auto allocation technology throws the rule book out of the window and allows users to unlock the real potential of their total vehicle fleet. Why route with zones and queues when you can plan your whole fleet as one integrated resource? Those companies that use it, love it. It's a game changer in this market place and I would encourage operators out there to take a look."

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Analytics keep Autocab users in control



AUTOCAB IS A LEADING SUPPLIER OF PRIVATE HIRE TAXI BOOKING and dispatch software management systems. Like iCabbi, Autocab's technology platform brings scalable growth to companies by automating many of the human-intensive processes. Some of the Cheshire-based firm's customers enjoy as much as 70% automation by utilising its phone systems, online/web bookings and its passenger app.

Efficiencies can be further enhanced through Autocab's new Business Intelligence solution, Analytics—an industry first. Analytics processes every customer, driver, journey, phone, text and software interaction, in real-time. This results in a powerful suite of business intelligence reports which give business owners complete control, visibility and clarity over every aspect of their business.

"The market told us it needed an easier and better way to make sense of the data being collected about customers, drivers and their business," said Safa Alkateb [pictured], managing director of Autocab. "Businesses want to leverage the knowledge and insight hidden within that information. Analytics is a highly strategic addition to the Autocab portfolio because it empowers our customers to take action."

He added: "Our early-access customers are consistently seeing an

increase in bookings, enhanced driver performance and better driver retention, which is a fantastic success."

Jon Smith, marketing director at Autocab, added: "Imagine an X-Ray machine showing what's really going on across your business. Using your data to provide intelligence and insight about what's working and what's not, all in real-time! Our Customers are reliant on so many other people to deliver a great service—dispatchers in the office, drivers on the road, and additional administrative staff.

"Until now, business owners have been reliant on external data analysts and advisors to understand what's working well, who's working hard, and, more importantly, what isn't working. Analytics helps private hire taxi businesses visualise what's going well and where there's room for improvement."

So, it sounds clichéd, but as every coin has two sides, technology, too can be both a boon and a bane. Really, it all depends on how we use it. But it certainly appears that, if used wisely, technology can lead to real success for firms within the private hire and taxi industry.

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Allocation without frontiers

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CATALINA SOFTWARE certainly knows from customers

trying to build their national and international business that connectivity and mobility are key factors in being able to quickly and efficiently allocate work, monitor the booking progress or control service quality.

With the release of an industry-first innovation, Freedom Global, its customers can now dynamically allocate work to their worldwide network of agents, in turn enabling them to assign bookings to their drivers via Catalina's driver app Freedom Mobile for Android and iOS devices.

Laurence Butcher [pictured, right], operations director at Catalina, said: "Freedom Global is driving mobility in every sense of the word. Transporting people, no matter where they are, giving our customers the flexibility to capitalise on new markets and enabling the move away from desk-based systems to anytime, anywhere solutions."



The recent acquisition of London-based Brunel by Europcar Group, the European leader in vehicle

rental services—and a major player in mobility—highlights how important technology has become. Europcar was particularly attracted by Brunel's mobile applications, its high quality and its operational excellence.

Anthony Edwards [pictured, left], chief executive of Brunel, said: "Brunel's successful relationship continues with Catalina, finding a perfect balance between continued technological advancements and value for money. Both nationwide and internationally we believe we have the right partner beside us to keep pace with the changing environment, as well as acceleration of our business growth."

