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Will you weather the technology storm?

There's no getting away from the fact that technology is changing the taxi and private hire business.

Uber brought about the most sweeping transformation of the sector by coupling drivers with passengers through a smartphone app. Unsurprisingly, Uber's minimalism and easy-on-the pocket prices have left some operators stressed out trying to compete cost-effectively.

But there's more than one way to crack an egg, and rather than giving in to Uber, many in the industry have successfully got together with software firms to do things their own way.

iCabbi propels Panther's great leap forward

◆ Dispatch specialist iCabbi is under no illusion that for taxi companies to respond effectively they need a solution that is innovative and cost efficient. iCabbi's products and services are cloud-based, so it can react to market changes by quickly developing, testing and implementing new features.

The company's technology is geared toward automation, from booking via its app, its web booker, or by means of interactive voice response (IVR). Correspondingly, dispatch and back office procedures can be entirely automated, leading to greater operational efficiency, decreased costs and, most crucially, the ability for company owners and managers to get back to concentrating on growing the business.

The results iCabbi has delivered for its customers are remarkable. Andy Cundell, director of Panther Taxis in Cambridge said: "Since moving to iCabbi 11 months ago, we've doubled the number of automated bookings we do. Our IVR has increased by 38%, app bookings by 202% and our web bookings by 750%. It's allowed us to reduce our costs, manage more bookings and drive the business forward."

Peter Kelso, manager of Glasgow Private Hire, also sung iCabbi's praises. He said: "In the six weeks since moving on to iCabbi we have seen our IVR bookings increase from approximately 25% to 55%. Our app bookings have increased by more than 30% and we hope to see this increase more now that we are taking credit/debit card bookings via the app.

"We did not utilise the web bookings service from our previous supplier, but we now offer this to our customers and we are starting to see growth on web bookings."

Autocab deals with disruption and delivers growth for Aqua

◆ Autocab is another leading supplier of private hire taxi booking and dispatch software management. As with 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 using 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.

"Love it or hate it, the taxi industry has been disrupted," said Autocab's sales director Hassan Abod. "This should be seen as an opportunity for private hire taxi firms to up their game and give customers what they want."

He added: "By using technology smartly, it's possible to truly focus on the needs of the customer, offer a consistently great customer service and ensure the provision of cars when, and where, a customer needs them. This is good news for operators, passengers and drivers."

Aqua Cars, based in Portsmouth, is one of the leading taxi companies on the south coast. Managing director Ronnie Leng said: "Autocab's holistic approach to booking and dispatch has delivered beyond our expectations—our operators are already up to speed and comfortably processing bookings in less time than with our previous software solution. We understand the importance of automation and Autocab's software is delivering exactly what our business needs."

Catalina engineers Brunel's successful international bid

◆ Catalina Software, a Norfolk-based provider of chauffeur, courier and logistics solutions is moving the game on big style. Systems and functionality developed by Catalina for Brunel's bespoke Freedom solution have enabled the ground transportation

Richard Hardy, Catalina

specialist to successfully bid for the London business of a US headquartered multinational. This has led to an increase in its annual revenue and new capabilities to drive its business growth.

Catalina was asked by its client, Brunel, for development and project management assistance so it could meet the technical and timing requirements of the US Company's tender. Having worked with Catalina to streamline the management of its business for 15 years, Brunel had confidence the team could deliver not only a new web booking site but also four additional system advances and features, to a very tight schedule.

Catalina managed the development and implementation process of the new functionality, which provides for a daily download of an encrypted file containing employee details, integration with its expenses management system and phone apps with the same in-built travel and expenses policy constraints as the new web-booking system.

Because of these developments, Brunel has become integral to its US client's ground transport management, streamlining its booking processes while also providing greater visibility and policy compliance. For Brunel, the benefits extend beyond overnight growth in bookings to increased operational efficiency through industry-high online booking rates, opportunities to provide

Anthony Edwards, Brunel

larger-scale and more sophisticated services for clients.

Anthony Edwards, Brunel's managing director, said: "Catalina supports and enhances its product in a way that really helps us push our business forward. Having this new functionality is key to our business growth, and opens up new revenue stream opportunities for us."

Catalina Software operations manager Richard Hardy added: "We are delighted that this project has proved so valuable for Brunel. It highlights how we can add value for our clients by working seamlessly with them and their customers, and managing projects from start to successful 'go-live'."

Dever's application interface

Dever delivers professional standards to the small operator

◆ Another software design company concentrating on the transport sector is Hampshire-based Dever Software. Mark Tait is responsible for the design and development of 'Dispatch', the firm's booking management tool, designed specifically for the chauffeur service industry.

Mark claims that Dispatch takes away a lot of the manual, labour intensive functions in running a chauffeur service company.

"From the recording of bookings, sending out confirmations and allocating work to drivers to the quick and easy invoicing, all tasks are much quicker and easier to control. This saves time for our users and can save them direct administration costs. In addition, this enables our customers to concentrate on growing their business, rather than trying to keep up with their current workload."

Stu Bembridge uses Dever's Dispatch software. He operates Deben-air.com, an airport transfer company based in Suffolk. Stu says that when he was planning his business in 2012, he appreciated the way forward would be to use technology, but originally when taking a booking, he just used a pen and diary and confirmed everything via e-mail. As Stu's business developed, he realised he needed a more professional look and feel to booking confirmations.

"We scoured the internet for service providers in the taxi dispatch market, then we found Dever Software. From our first contact, nothing was too much trouble for them. Bearing in mind my wife neither nor I had any computer skills. An on-line demonstration was provided to us, and we warmed to the Dever solution very quickly."

Stu has now been using Dever software for the past two years, and has doubled his jobs, doubled

in size, and has plans for additional expansion this year.

"The guys at Dever are continuously improving the system and our clients are sometimes shocked at our professionalism, with driver details and photos. Having such a powerful system at hand has empowered us to remain at the forefront of our customers' minds."

Stu says that, as a small operator, he feels it's imperative to always be connected to your business and this system enables him to do just that.

"For example, on a quite evening, while sitting watching the TV, we can remotely access our booking software, thus enabling us to see just what is going on with our drivers. It certainly shows just how far technology has come," he says.

Stu adds that in years gone by, even a small operator would have had to employ additional staff to 'man the phones'. However, he believes that in today's market, staff numbers for administration will now remain low.

"With no need to purchase two-way radios, the Dever system has saved money across the board. Our drivers like the fact that we can track them without having to give them a call. Great service should be at the forefront of any operator's mind, to be a winner."

Technology without compromise for the chauffeur sector

◆ Another company dedicated to the needs of modern chauffeur companies is Chauffeur Drive Systems (CDS). Gareth Williams and Denise Long are behind the Scottish-based business. They are both firm believers that chauffeuring is a service without compromise; a service that is built on a personal relationship with a client.

"Our web-based booking, dispatch and management system provides a solution for the modern chauffeur company," says Gareth. "We are very much for creating an intuitive, affordable system, to help the small companies survive and compete."

Gareth believes his technology vastly reduces the time spent on administration, with some clients reporting up to 50% more time saved. "Through reduced effort required on the part of the administration team, plus with clients booking their own jobs through the portal, it's possible to scale business up without increasing non-driving staff," he adds.

Gareth Williams and Denise Long of CDS

Aspen Executive Cars

Technology brings efficiency for Driven Worldwide

◆ Driven Worldwide, trusted by some of the largest, most demanding companies in the world to drive their most important people, says technology has delivered tangible benefits to its clients and business partners.

It's EMEA office chief executive Mike Bell admits you can't solve all your problems with technology, but he says you can use it to deliver practical solutions that grant access to your most precious asset—your people.

"Our aim is to remove all of the time-wasting processes in our business, and in doing so we will free up our teams to focus on where we add most value, which is managing complex itineraries across the world."

For instance, Driven Worldwide's Itinerary Management Module (IMM) tool scans PDFs for dates, times, addresses, contacts, phone numbers, flight numbers and, once identified, allows its coordinators to turn all the information into a booking by a simple click. "This removes the need for duplicated data entry," says Mike.

Another 'tech tool' used by Driven Worldwide is 'ChauffeurCall'. This was originally designed to overcome the issues surrounding contact between

Andrew Moore of Aspen Executive Cars, a small chauffeur firm based in Newcastle and Corbridge, speaks highly of CDS.

"As anyone in the chauffeuring sector knows, your booking system is the heart of the business and the single most important piece of software that you'll use. From the outset, Gareth and Denise couldn't have been more helpful with their system. Gareth would adapt, add and change things quickly to suit my needs."

Andrew added: "The functionality fits our needs perfectly, with easy navigation, intuitive user interface and much better time management. A hugely improved invoicing and payroll system has minimised booking or

driver job allocation errors and has enhanced statistical reporting to our wide customer base.

"Allocating jobs to drivers now takes minutes and in-operation changes are immediate, delivering information directly to drivers' smart phones. I am delighted to say that I now have a system that is clean and modern, very easy to use."

Dave Griffin, of Chauffeur Services Direct in Worcester, also uses CDS' services. He says that whether, or not, you like Uber, the business model is fantastic.

"I feel companies need to be brought into the modern world, and Chauffeur Drive Systems has created a very competent system. Now bookings we make can be confirmed to the booker and passenger via email or SMS. The booking can also be sent to the chauffeur via the same method."

Mike Bell, Driven Worldwide

Torsten Brose

passenger and chauffeur. "Mobile numbers are not always reliable, and passengers want direct contact with their chauffeur," adds Mike. "ChauffeurCall uses the local numbers that we own in over 100 countries, and these numbers are integrated into our own telephone system. On booking a service, a local number is allocated to the client and remains unchanged."

Mike continues: "All calls can be monitored and logged. This is the most advanced system of its type on the market, and it is recognised as being a superior system to using direct mobile numbers. It has been adopted as standard by all of our clients, and is now being used by other sectors."

Magenta's open approach to a changing business

◆ As with many things, change doesn't happen overnight. For instance, dispatch software has been automating operations for over a decade and London-based Magenta Technology is a pioneer of real-time scheduling.

The company's business development director Torsten Brose says good, forward thinking technology forms the backbone of every successful private hire and taxi dispatch business in the UK today. He believes that if operators want to succeed, they must tackle the often-thorny issue of opening their operations to software suppliers.

But how do you choose who to trust? Especially in dispatch automation there is often a feeling of one system suits all. But is that true? Do all systems deliver the same functionality and are they all really a safe pair of hands? "

Most definitely not", claims Torsten.

"Some systems will just allow you to replicate manual planning process in an automated fashion, meaning that you still rely on a system of zones and queues. This method takes traditional practices but does not give you the benefit of a fully optimised solution.

"We have worked hard over the years to give operators something unique—an optimisation system that really does think for itself. Our Autonomics engine will soon be taking the UK market by storm. It's unique in that it allows you to plan in a reactive way that maximises your return on investment, and gives you the opportunity to make the most of the resources you have."

Torsten is quick to make clear that this is not just "marketing bull". He says: "It's the reality and is a game changer for operators. Our Autonomics engine allows users to optimise their fleet as the living breathing resource it is. By using sophisticated algorithms to increase driver productivity, we are reinventing how the allocation decision making process really works. This change in software thinking allows users to unlock the full potential of their fleet. No one else can do what we

can do; we have the guts to say it and the software to prove it."

Location Cars is one of the longest-standing Central London-based private hire companies offering a full spectrum of services. With over 30 years' experience in this market, it needed a leading-edge dispatch optimisation system to help plan, manage and monitor its growing operation. Running more than 80 vehicles, Location Cars recently made the decision to replace its incumbent system, Cordic, with Magenta Technology.

Paul Barter, director of Location Cars, said: "Transitioning from one system to another has not been straightforward, but the Magenta team has been with us every step of the way. Its positive, can do attitude, and commitment to us as a customer is light years ahead of what we've experienced with other suppliers. Magenta's core functionality is ground breaking and its future development plans will mean that Location Cars is well placed to tackle any future challenges that our business may face."

Indeed, Magenta's Torsten Brose makes no bones about the fact that the private hire industry is in a massive period of change. He added: "Existing threats, such as Uber—and other concerns looming on the horizon, like driverless vehicles and the whole area of 'mobility as a service'—mean that now is the time to pick the right software that will help you weather the storm that is coming."

Dramatic words from Torsten Brose? Perhaps. But there can be no doubt that it is now a case of looking at the bigger picture. New software needs to future proof business, not just tackle today's challenges.

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