

SUNLIGHT TAXI GOES TECHY

Calling a cab used to involve waving your hands frantically while calling out at the top of your voice. But now, thanks to Sunlight Taxi Sdn Bhd's embracement of technology, you can do so by a simple phone call or a few clicks of a button.

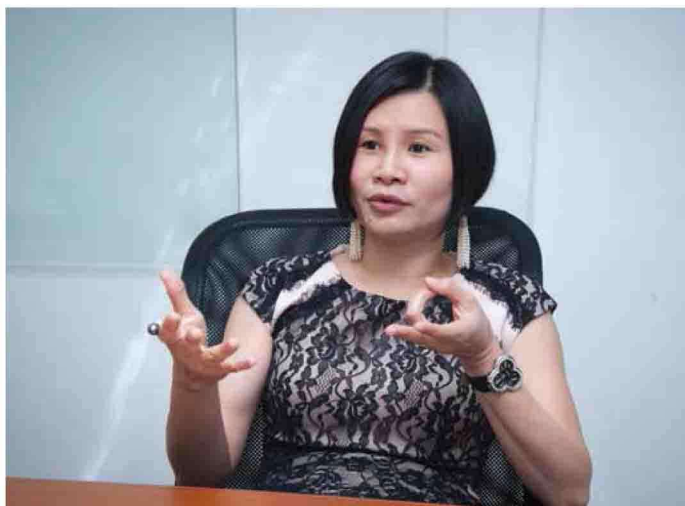
By Diana Othaman



Getting a taxi back in the day meant standing on the curb while waving your hand and hoping the taxi will stop. Even if it does stop, there's no guarantee that the driver would be willing to take you to your intended destination. And if he agrees, then comes the fare haggling part. Sometimes, a taxi driver would demand a flat marked up fee rather than charging the fee shown in the meter as the destination is not within his "comfort zone".

Sunlight Taxi Sdn Bhd seeks to overcome these inherent problems by applying new

technology to a very traditional business. Dato' Choi Wei Yee, Executive Director of Sunlight Taxi Group, says "Sunlight Taxi's core business is renting out taxis, and the Group has more than 3,000 taxis and 4,000 taxi drivers. We also have other businesses like our call centre. Previously, we were using trunk radio and our call centre used to be very paper-based, and we were just using pen and paper without any computers. So, we upgraded and computerised everything and started using this technology to develop our apps and we also developed our Global Positioning System (GPS), where each taxi is fitted with terminal unit with a screen.



Dato' Choi Wei Yee

“We came up with the idea of upgrading our call centre because we wanted to increase our drivers’ earnings, that’s the first point. After increasing their earnings only can we expect them to provide a high level of service.” Dato’ Choi

We have a black box so that we can track the drivers’ location and performance.”

According to Dato’ Choi, ever since the company computerised its operations, its call centre operators no longer need to write down a repeat customer’s details as the system includes the customer database. However, if a new customer calls for the first time, the operators would still need to key in the details into the database but when the same customer calls again, the system will show the information.

“This helps our operations a lot, because last time when we were using paper, when a customer called in, it sometimes took, especially during the peak hours, about 20 to 30 minutes for the cab to respond. Because we used to broadcast to all our taxi drivers and we would have to wait for them to respond and then we had to call back the customer, everything took about 20 to 30 minutes. Now, with this system in place, in addition to our GPS, we are also developing our app. With the app, our customers will no longer need to call in. They will just need to key in everything and the system will run automatically and detect the nearest available taxi. This really shortens the entire process, and if the taxi

is available nearby, it will take less than five minutes,” she explains.

New Technology

Unicablink Sdn Bhd was formed in 2013 to serve as the call centre and technology arm of the Sunlight Taxi Group. Its purpose is to transform the call centre into a technologically advanced one to increase efficiency and to better serve its customers. New methods of doing business had to be adapted to improve the service and in addition to its GPS-enabled taxis, the company has launched an integrated GPS-enabled taxi-dispatching system via an app (available on Android and Apple devices) which enables taxi-booking through a smartphone. It is a strategic and innovative system to replace the taxi-booking process of the old days. Sunlight Taxi also has many corporate clients who prefer to book online and the company offers them a system to do that. The company now has the technology and is able to offer the entire call centre “engine” to other taxi operators.

Adapting to Changes

However, embracing new technology isn’t without its own set of challenges. Adapting from the old fashioned radio to better and more recent technologies is a big challenge

for taxi drivers, especially to the more elderly ones who have gotten accustomed to old technology and are less receptive of changes. Unicablink Sdn Bhd’s Executive Director Henry Lee says, “Embracing new technology is not something you can force the taxi drivers to do overnight. What you’re seeing here now has just stated to happen over the past two to three years. It took Singapore twenty years in order to fine-tune this process. Now, without a terminal, Singapore taxi drivers cannot do their jobs. But without a terminal, our drivers still can. They go to queue up at the shopping centres and use their own way to negotiate with their passengers. If they have been queuing up at the bus-stops and taxi stands for many years, you cannot change their mindset to use the GPS immediately.”

According to Lee, the GPS has an effect of neutralising everyone’s ability. “If you’re a trunk radio driver, all the routes and short-cuts are in your head, but with the GPS, every driver would have the same knowledge on the shortest and fastest routes. It instantly neutralises everyone’s ability to earn a higher income, as the cake is still small. When you first start, everybody would be worse off. Only the smartest and the hardest working will

survive. The technology does bring some positive impact but it also brings some destructive impact, especially to the older generation drivers. But actually those who are good are the older generation drivers who practice honest driving and serve the customers well," he explains.

Still a Drivers' Market

There are many ways of hailing a cab. You can call in and say that you want a taxi, or you can use an app to book a taxi, be it online or through the phone but ultimately, it is whether the driver wants to pick you up or not. "At the moment, it is more of a drivers' market. They may choose not to pick you up if they will likely be caught in a traffic jam and waste valuable time. Many taxi drivers use the peak traffic hours as their rest time, which is why you'll find it hard to catch a cab during the peak hours. You may question why the taxi drivers do such things. We need time to fine-tune this entire operations. From a macro perspective, why the service is not actually up to expectations is the accumulated policy over many years. So, in order to force these drivers to pick passengers, number one, you have to ensure their income level which requires a certain technological platform and a certain structure that keeps feeding them with jobs," says Lee.

"We came up with the idea of upgrading our call centre because we wanted to increase our drivers' earnings, that's the first point. After increasing their earnings only can we expect them to provide a high level of service. And of course all this technology will help to improve the efficiency of our operations and allow us to offer better service to our customers," adds Dato' Choi.

The company was already running its call centre since 1996 using trunk radio had about 1,000 subscribers then, but new drivers were reluctant to join as the seasoned ones were hogging all the jobs. Hence, the company came up with a system that allocated jobs more fairly. "Now, the

new system allocates the nearest taxi to the passenger, but if there are really no taxis nearby and the customer still needs one, then we'll broadcast to all the taxis and see who wants to pick up the passenger, providing the customer is also willing to wait," she continues.

Better Monitoring

The arrival of new technology means that not only the drivers but the passengers are monitored by the company too, for security reasons. Even the cabs are being

data and the distance from one place to another, as well as the correct amount that needs to be paid by the passengers in their computer. Unicablink now provides the taxi number and the driver's ID, while the integrated GPS helps the driver to navigate better with extensive information on the best routes as well as traffic information. Apart from the taxi drivers' extensive knowledge of routes, the GPS's even larger database would mean that the drivers can pick up more customers in a day than they used to. Now, with the integration of GPS



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monitored for their physical condition, last service date and whether or not there are any mechanical issues. The information is securely recorded and are meticulously monitored to ensure that better service is provided. The company's taxi coupon counters are also operating using technology where they have the location

and the adaptation of the new system, taxi drivers no longer need to drive around aimlessly to look for passengers but instead, the passengers will look for them. All they need to do is wait and go to the locations once called, and hence have the potential of increasing their income by as much as 50%.



About the App

Going back to the app, you can choose to key in the pick-up or drop-off location of your choice and let the app's integrated map confirm the location or just let the app identify your current location as a pick-up point. Besides that, the app also shows the route to the destination, the distance in kilometres, how many taxis are available around your area, and your history of using the app. You can save the address for future use, so you won't need to type in the address again. An Order ID is also generated for the customers through the app. Customers can also make bookings for other people and all you need to do is to type in the passenger's name and location, and the passenger's required destination. A booking status will also be provided in the app to ensure the booking has been confirmed. Cancellation can also take place with no charge. Tips may be added as well and the possible tips as listed in the app are: extra RM3 for extra incentives, RM5 for traffic jams or peak

hours and RM10 for remote locations. This is to ensure that the taxi driver will not ask for a tip directly from the passengers.

As with anything new, customers are expected to take time to get accustomed to calling a cab via an app. "Even with the app already in place, most of the company's customers still prefer to call in as they prefer the personalised service it entails. Our call centre receives about 3,000 calls per day. We are not aggressively promoting our app at the moment. We are a traditional operator and we have a duty to deliver to our drivers and customers. We are here for the long term," stresses Lee.

Bright Future

Sunlight Taxi has definitely evolved for the better. Back in 1986, when Choi Teo Men founded this company, his only intention was to help his friends and himself to gain more income as a taxi driver but his blood, sweat and tears all paid off when he started

working on a taxi equipped with a 3-channel radio and successfully introduced a better taxi-based transport system.

Looking back now, a taxi with 3-channel radio isn't much if applied in today's world but the company has evolved from its humble beginnings to become one of the most advanced, with a GPS system integrated in each cab. Sunlight Taxi holds the Malaysia's Book of Records for offering the first integrated online taxi booking service with GPS. With its measured progress, the company is heading in the direction of their vision which is "to be the premier and preferred land transportation and other related service provider while providing excellent services and recognised internationally as the leading service in land transportation in Malaysia". With its willingness and capability to embrace and apply the latest technology, the future looks bright indeed for Sunlight Taxi. 🌟