

Cab Gab
by Abe Mittleman

With 2008 coming to a close I'll ask myself not what kind of a year it's been for the industry? But rather, What kind of a year has it been for me?

On September 20 , I reached the 38th anniversary of the first day I ever drove a NYC taxicab. Wow, I thought: I'm still active in this industry after all these years. How so much has changed while so much has stayed the same.

One very noticeable change came to me last January when for the first time in all these years I accepted a credit card for payment of a fare. The only times I have previously accepted anything other than US currency for payment of a fare was for those of you who remember when subway tokens were sometimes used to pay if a passenger was a little short. But never did I dream that one day I would accept credit cards. Well, now it's become routine.

Although the TLC promised us that acceptance of credit cards would bring us more business, I'm still not sure it has. However, despite all the objections I may have had and despite that we are paying fees for the passengers to use them it certainly makes it a lot easier than when we had to wait for our passengers who were short of cash to run into a cash machine.

This was also the year I finally got to say good bye to trip cards. How I hated those written reports that were rarely if ever asked for and would always end up in the garbage after holding them for three years as required.

Each year the TLC honors drivers for some of the good deeds they have done during the year passed. But, many deeds go unnoticed because they are only aware of them if it is reported by a passenger. I was dismayed that Mr. Thanh Bui, the other driver on my taxi was going to go unnoticed for what I consider to be a deed of great honor. He returned an estimated \$20,000 in cash to a person that had left it in the back seat of the taxi he was driving. I stepped in and wrote a letter to TLC Chairman Daus in which I commended him for this deed. It had not been reported by the recipients of this good deed. I'm glad Mr. Bui got his recognition at the annual award ceremony that was held at Rockefeller Center.

As gas prices rose beyond belief in the Spring and thru the Summer I wondered if this would put us out of business. After all, the TLC and the mayor were dead set

against us having any financial help to offset the added expense. But it seems that we weathered the storm. I don't know about you but I think our incomes increased as the gas prices went higher. Perhaps more people were not driving into the city and using more taxis instead. Perhaps it was the time of year that the prices were high. I have definitely noticed from year to year that the taxi business seems to be better during the months from April to June.

Now the price has done a complete turn around. Aren't we lucky that the prices have fallen to levels that have not been seen in several years? Of course the TLC will say they knew this would happen so this is why they were unwilling to help when the price was over \$4. a gallon. But, I don't think anyone could have predicted they would fall so far.

In July I reported on a service station in Rockland County that was selling E85 ethanol. I suggested that since all of our Crown Victorias 2006 and newer are equipped to use this fuel it may not be a bad idea that those vehicles seek to use this fuel. After all, many NYC police cars and many NYC sanitation vehicles do use this fuel. It seemed like this could be a good alternative to the high cost of gasoline. But, I have to say that I am very disappointed that despite my suggestions few thought it was worth while. I haven't gotten much feed back.

In May of this past year my long time partner, a man who I've known since childhood and has been my partner in the mini fleet that I own half interest (1 medallion) decided to sell his half of the corporation for what I thought was a good sum of \$600,000. At that time I could have done the same and made a substantial profit. I decided to wait. In October with the price constantly rising I was offered \$700,000 for my half. I had to do some serious soul searching. After pondering the pros and cons of such a sale I, with many reservations, said NO!

Now if you would have asked me 5 years ago if I would have said no to such an offer, I would have said no way. But, not to be too complicated, it came down to weather or not I wanted to divorce myself from being in an owners position. I am so used to driving part time after 39 years in this business, I couldn't imagine that I would not be driving a taxi any more. So, considering that I am still healthy and able, I knew I still wanted to drive regardless of the monetary rewards of such a sale. I couldn't see myself giving up the advantage of ownership if this was the case. Also, despite that there are some who disagree and believe the top has hit, the value keeps rising even as the national economy declines. How can anyone in my position walk away?

One thing about this business is that it's never dull. There have always been and always will be challenges and obstacles that we have to either make decisions on or overcome. I've been here for quite a while. Here's something that amuses me: the TLC publishes a list of all medallion drivers in chronological order on their web site. Out of 44,236 licensed taxi drivers, I'm #227 on the list. That means I've had my hack license longer than 99.5% of the other drivers. I'm sort of proud of that! I guess I may go for #1. I guess I'll be happy to last that long! Mini fleet association member Roy Whitley is #10. One of the original Mini Fleet association members Jack Dym is now #1. I salute them both.