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Hi-tech taxis for the disabled

Vincent Blake | April 17, 2007

TAXIS and technology are not usually part of the same thought process.



Point the way: GPS technology in a Lime taxi Picture: Bob Finlayson

But it was the first direction Lime Taxis' founders took when they decided to launch a new brand in Sydney. Bill Moss, the then head of Macquarie Bank's banking and property group, wanted technology to drive the business and improve customer service.

"This new fleet will help improve the lives of many Sydneysiders who - like myself - have found it difficult to access taxis," he said at the brand's launch in February last year.

Mr Moss, who has lived with muscular dystrophy for more than 20 years, resigned from the bank at the end of March with 45 wheelchair accessible taxis on the road.

The job of getting Lime Taxis started went to Stephen Albin who was selected from the bank's property division to be Lime Taxis' chief executive.

He set out to find the best of breed in taxi technology.

Albin's research took him across the globe. He visited CET Technologies in Singapore, Halda in Sweden, Digital Dispatch Systems in Canada and Mobile Knowledge in Melbourne.

All the units were first-rate, Albin says, but the company chose DDS as the supplier of the main units.

"The DDS units were just right for us," he says.

Lime Taxis staff was assisted by Macquarie bank's information systems division.

"They've been great and the tech support people and have been loving the change from looking after spreadsheets," he says.

The DDS unit works with a GPS system from GPS Technologies, a Keycorp K23 payment terminal and Raywood security camera.

The Lime brand was launched in February last year, but the first cabs did not hit the streets until October.

Much of the delay was due to Lime Taxis' choice to use the mobile phone GSM/GPRS system for its data needs.

It is the first cab company in Australia to move from the radio packet-switching systems - a change that required government approval. But now Lime Taxis has a fully integrated system.

The payment terminal is live to the banking database so drivers get real-time information on creditcard and

Eftpos transactions.

The dispatch service tied into the GPS system so that when a driver takes a job, the address co-ordinates of the pick-up are sent to the accepting driver's GPS unit, which then issues directions.

Getting lost is no longer an option.

"We have cab drivers interacting with this technology," Albin says.

"In the beginning we had a little bit of resistance because it was a bit different.

"But the ones who have been with us for a while swear by it. That was one of the key barriers we had to address, but we're getting the acceptance over time.

"Drivers are getting used to it and providing us with some really good feedback as well.

"They must like the units. They must be so much more comfortable as well."

Lime Taxis quest for top technology went beyond things electronic to the vehicles used. It customised a fleet of Mercedes-Benz Vito vans to be able to accept wheelchairs. Other passengers get leather seats.

But being bankers they could not leave it there. The IT systems - in-car and back-office - are "economically redundant", Albin says.

"They have a programmed life of five years. Technology could change and we do not want to be left behind."

One of the changes in the future will be in-car entertainment, Albin says.

"Singapore taxis have it, as do New York cabs," he says.