



SATURDAY SPOTLIGHT

'It will be worth it'

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FROM the bank of new computer monitors and control towers lining one wall of BTA Dispatching's headquarters in St George's, one might be forgiven for thinking that global positioning systems (GPS) are a little bit complicated. The truth is – they are and they aren't.

The technical wizardry behind the \$400,000 system recently installed by BTA is undoubtedly intricate and difficult to explain to the layman. But for cabbies and their customers, GPS should prove a piece of cake.

Essentially, all of BTA's drivers will eventually be hooked up to a central system which knows exactly where the vehicles are, thanks to a GPS antennae installed in their cab.

Jobs are entered into the system by call takers as they come in and the computer then chooses the driver nearest the customer and alerts them to the fare. It's as simple as that. Government, which made it law on Monday for all taxi drivers to have GPS installed in their cabs, hopes this high-tech solution will dramatically improve response times.

And, though taxi owners and drivers weren't happy that the scheme was made mandatory, they now appear to be embracing the change with good grace.

BTA has so far signed up 360 taxi owners to its Digital Dispatch system and president Michael Ray predicts the company will soon have more than 400 drivers.

Two other companies – Radio Cabs and an amalgamation of Co-op Taxis and the Bermuda Central Dispatch Company – are also vying for cabbies' business.

Mr. Ray said yesterday that though he disagreed with the way Government brought in GPS, he was confident it would improve the Island's taxi services.

"I believe that this system will enhance," he said. "We still don't agree with the way it was started but it is here. Let's go forward and promote ourselves. It's law so let's do it and do it well.

"If you consider what we've spent and what the drivers have spent, you are looking at almost a million dollars to get this working. But I think it will be worth it."

At BTA's HQ this week, Mr. Ray and his staff were still testing the system. A handful of drivers were being sent "dummy jobs" to ensure their vehicle's MTD (mobile data terminal) was receiving information.

Two hundred and seventy drivers for BTA have the system installed, at a cost of about \$1,500 each initially and then a \$150-a-month fee, with the rest soon to follow.

But they won't begin using it until any potential problems have been totally ironed out. In the meantime, a voice-operated system is still in place.

Operations manager Vivian Sailsman said: "Some guys are ready. We have got guys that are live right now – at the moment between 25 and 40 who can use it. It's been actually pretty smooth.

"I have only had one guy who has problems – he just wasn't able to log on but it should be solved pretty quickly. I think it's good. Obviously it's new and we do have some kinks to work out.

"The drivers have got to get comfortable with it – there is a learning curve involved. But they actually seem pretty good about it. They seem to like it."

Malcolm Pugh, from Digital Dispatch, the Vancouver-based company behind BTA's GPS system, is on the Island to help with any teething troubles.

He said he'd seen numerous taxi firms around the world install GPS – and reap the benefits.

"We have lots of customers in Europe – in Stockholm, France, Finland and Leeds in the UK. A lot in North America too. It's an effective system – it takes the strain. It's simple because it is made simple at this end.

"It's quite complex at the machine level but as far as the user is concerned it's made as simple as possible."

As calls come in, operators can give jobs different attributes. For example, if a customer wanted a



New technology: Malcolm Pugh, from Digital Dispatch, with the mobile data terminal which fits inside cabs. (Photo by Glenn Tucker)

female driver or a taxi which took pets, the system would only choose applicable vehicles to send. "It's intelligent," said Mr. Pugh. "If you take an early booking, the system will decide later on who's right for the job. If a family want their child taken to school each day, you can programme it in and it won't forget.

"The system just looks for cars located within a two kilometre radius of the job and allots. It's a true fire-and-forget system. The job is fired into the system and the call taker can forget that job and move on."

Operator Jennifer Waldron said the trial runs were going well. "I think once it's up and running it's going to benefit the customers that are calling for cabs. The drivers seem to be optimistic about the new service. They'll probably miss the voice-over for a while but we'll all get used to it."

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