

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY

COMCAB REPLACES MOBISTAR

When Computer Cab plc, the UK's largest radio taxi circuit, decided to replace its Mobistar system, the company knew it was an excellent opportunity to leverage on some remarkable advances in mobile telecommunication technology.

The new Advantage despatch system which has been developed by Computer Cab plc utilises not just powerful new in-cab terminals but also moves away from radio and onto the very latest telecommunications platforms, using GPRS (General Packet Radio Services) to send and receive information to and from the fleet of 3,500 licensed taxis.

Computer Cab plc launched the Mobistar system back in 1996 and it was truly groundbreaking, using GPS (Global Positioning Satellites) to accurately identify the location of all available taxis and automatically despatching bookings to the closest cab. The system has enjoyed a busy life, despatching more jobs than any other circuit in London. The new Advantage system still utilises GPS for vehicle location, as to this day this remains the most accurate means of pinpointing every single vehicle. The driver and vehicle status and location are then communicated back to the Advantage booking system over GPRS. The real miracle of the Advantage system is that the in cab terminal houses the GPS satellite receiver and the GPRS communication modules in one remarkably easy to use piece of kit.

GETTING THE ADVANTAGE

Malcolm Paice, Head of Operations at Computer Cab plc explains. "The Advantage system sees us installing the Digitax 3GMDT into our 3,500 taxis and this is clearly one of the most advanced in vehicle devices on the market. After 11 years with the highly successful Mobistar system we didn't just want to replace the equipment, we wanted to take an extra step beyond and provide our drivers with a responsive and easy to use terminal which can handle our dynamic business. This MDT has an easy to read, full colour touch screen which makes it much safer for the driver to use as he or she drives around London. We have written bespoke software for our drivers which means the thousands of jobs we despatch each day can be delivered faster and more accurately to our fleet."

GPRS has significant benefits over radio, which has been the communication technology of choice for taxi circuits for over 30 years, from the very first voice system to the more advanced data despatch system used today. Malcolm continued: "Radio really revolutionised the taxi industry and enabled companies like ours to seriously increase the number of jobs that get despatched each day. When we moved from voice despatch to data this too had a huge benefit to our business because we were able to send job details direct to the driver without the need for voice despatch to negotiate with many different drivers at a time. For many of us it was always a concern that moving away from voice despatch might make the process less personal

so we have always maintained speech channels to allow drivers to contact us if a problem arises. That is a feature of the Advantage system too, but we'll essentially be using the Digitax terminal as a mobile phone so a driver can safely and easily contact us without the loss of quality that radio sometimes has."

BENEFITS OF ADVANTAGE SYSTEM

The other benefit of moving away from radio and onto GPRS is that fully national coverage can be achieved, whereas radio is always geographically restricted. For London radio circuits this usually meant the service was restricted to the M25 boundaries, but those days will be gone for Computer Cab plc with the move to Advantage. Malcolm described some other advantages of the move to GPRS: "The main benefits will be the totally national coverage and much faster communication speeds, some functions will take a fraction of the time they can take on radio systems. But there is also the amazing increase in the type of data you can send to the drivers' terminal. Radio data systems are usually restricted to basic text but now images and much richer information relating to a job or a customer can be despatched direct to the terminal.

"The Digitax 3GMDT was a great choice for us in this respect because it is practically an on board PC for the driver, so adding features such as internet and email access as well as full SatNav capabilities is very easy. Every terminal will be pre-loaded with detailed electronic mapping software and to be honest for most drivers this will satisfy their need for simple directions, many drivers will not want or feel the need for SatNav- but if they want it the option is still there."

SOFTWARE SYSTEM TAILORED TO ADVANTAGE

Cutting edge hardware is nothing without the software to support it and Computer Cab plc has again engaged the winning formula of developing their very own system rather than rely on an off-the-shelf piece of software which has to be shoehorned into the business. Malcolm added: "The London taxi market and our customers specifically dictate that you can't just buy an off-the-peg software solution, we tailored the Mobistar system around the London taxi account business and the Advantage system follows this approach- it's just a lot more advanced. Our regular driver surveys and masses of input from our fleet has helped us create a despatch process that makes it easier for our drivers to service our customers. This will keep our customers supplied with prompt taxis and our drivers earning from good quality account work. That's all new technology needs to do- make business easier and more efficient for everyone concerned."



Trialling the new Advantage terminals in the Computer Cab plc training facility



Cab drivers like the easy to view screen of the Digitax 3GMDT