

WHY DON'T NOBU WANT US?

by Alan Fisher, editor of Call Sign the Dial-a-Cab in house magazine

In the November 2005 issue of Call Sign, DAC driver John Fisher wrote of the problem outside Nobu in Berkeley Street, Mayfair. He said he had taken registration numbers of touts operating outside – apparently doing so with the backing of the “bouncers” outside and staff inside. John said that the cars even had an unofficial rank and that when he tried to stop outside, the Concierge told him he was causing an obstruction and should move off! John challenged Nobu to call the police and not unsurprisingly, they rejected the offer! Instead, the touts threw snide comments at both John and another Dial-a-Cab driver that was also there. Call Sign passed the details over to Sergeant Dave Hillson of the Cab Enforcement Section of TOCU and a raid was later made when several minicab drivers were arrested. They also spoke to Alan Matthews, who at the time was Head of Projects and Developments at the PCO. He wrote to the owners of the vehicles concerned, asking them to respond to John Fisher’s allegations. We heard no more after that.



Natalia

Now over three years later, DaC driver Natalia Shalom (A34) told Call Sign that nothing has changed at Nobu! Natalia may be female and young at 23, but she doesn’t allow anyone to walk over her. In fact, Natalia even asked Call Sign to volunteer her as a decoy for the tout squad – an offer that the police considered being too dangerous! Recently Natalia, who works nights, dropped a passenger outside Nobu and there were so many minicabs outside that the only way she could stop was by double-parking. Her boyfriend, and also a DaC driver, Daniel Woodhouse (K84), joined her. She was told by Nobu staff to move on as she was causing an obstruction. Natalia and Daniel both refused. Whilst the staff were not rude at first, their attitude changed and became more threatening. Natalia was then told that taxis weren’t needed as they had their own car service! As a night driver, Natalia told us that most passengers coming out of these establishments would prefer a taxi, but are not given the chance. “These minicabs will keep coming back,” said Natalia. “The best way to fight them is by putting a taxi rank outside the door, then passengers would have a choice - and I know who most would choose!”

Then on April 20, that choice arrived – albeit unofficially. Daniel was outside Nobu and told a DaC dispatcher that the restaurant was saying real taxis weren’t needed as they used minicabs! That was enough for most Dial-a-Cab drivers that read the message and they flooded into Berkeley Street like the Cavalry, with their for hire signs lighting up the street and stopping minicabs pulling up outside! Minicabs had to be moved on much to the obvious distress of the DaC drivers who tried not to smile! The DaC exercise answered the question as to whether we are wanted at Nobu or not. Well done Daniel and Natalie. And are you reading this at the PCO? We need a rank at Nobu...

CLUBS AND RESTAURANT TOUTS: THE DAC WORD IS SPREADING!

Although the Call Sign story about Nobu was one of the first instances of an uprising against minicab touts stealing the work of licensed taxis, it certainly wasn’t the last. Within days, Dial-a-Cab drivers had begun forming unofficial ranks at many of the main restaurants and clubs in the city. In addition, the rank outside Smiths restaurant in Charterhouse Street was kept full of available DaC taxis with that radio circuit’s dispatchers constantly updating the situation. But it was several days into the operation before non-Dial-a-Cab taxis began joining DaC’s drivers and now ComCab has also agreed to update their drivers.

It was the LTDA’s excellent video of clipboard Jonnies from licensed clubs approaching prospective passengers and asking if “they wanted a taxi” that started the process. Soon after, drivers began “hanging up” outside Nobu’s

Berkeley Street restaurant and the process spread like wildfire with many clubs/ restaurants suddenly finding “ranks” outside their doors. Most had their own clipboard Jonnies and tried to force the taxis away. No sooner were threats used than DaC’s dispatchers put out messages and reinforcements arrived to extend the rank in a show of support.

PCO TAKE ACTION

Soon the PCO were stung into action and it was just into the action’s second week that news filtered through that three of the clubs on the LTDA video have had their licenses withdrawn – pending appeals. Clubs and restaurants throughout the city have been targeted and most gained ranks outside that were certainly not legal. However, ask any DaC driver about that illegality and they will all say the same: Compared to the touting that the taxi drivers are trying to defeat, they are like angels!

Several clubs have tried to stop taxis ranking by placing cones outside, but that failed to stop them. Wardens have also begun appearing and as usual, taxis are usually the fall guys. But that too failed badly when the DaC driver’s grapevine – via their dispatchers - passed the word within minutes as to the departure of said council employees! Call Sign, together with LTDA’s TAXI correspondent Steve McNamara and trade journalist John Pace have gathered many photos of DaC’s drivers involved in reclaiming the ranks from touts and between us have seen several incidents that could have turned violent.



John Pace caught this minicab driver on camera

KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK



Brian Rice

Brian Rice, Chairman of Dial-a-Cab said: “We are delighted at DaC to help the Trade combat touting by ensuring our members are kept informed of developments as they happen via their terminal. However, we must remember we have the high moral ground and it must be maintained, our standards should not fall to the levels of the touts by inciting violence. This is not a matter of ‘taxi wars’ as some would like to portray, it is a matter of taxi drivers completing their legitimate work and of course what is paramount is that it is also a matter of public safety. Members of the public must have access to a licensed vehicle together with a licensed and professional driver, which is what they receive when they enter a taxi, the same cannot be said of the touts.”

Thanks must go to the dispatchers at DAC for their input and the Board of Management for giving their permission for the updates. Through the pages of Taxi Globe, I’m sure we’d all like to say how proud we felt at the action taken but would ask all drivers to remember that they have far more to lose than the minicabs do, so please do not rise to any baiting by minicab drivers or clipboard Jonnies. I have spoken to several touts over the past weeks. Incredibly, some hadn’t even realised it was illegal to call yourself a taxi and had assumed that their PH licence actually made them fully fledged taxi drivers! However, the comment that surfaced more than any other was that taxis never wanted this work when it was busy on the streets. With London showing signs of becoming busier, I certainly hope that they are wrong and that we won’t just drive past these clubs and restaurants when work becomes easier to find.

Thanks to the Dial-a-Cab action, the reputation of London taxi drivers at these evening and late night establishments has gone through the roof, with some regulars at the restaurants and clubs claiming that it’s nice to pay a fair price once again having become used to a £20 minimum! It’s nice to be the good guys once again with passengers also cheering us on, but it is so important that we don’t just drop them all as soon as it gets busy...