

# Mario Canseco: Vancouver taxi riders take issue with safety, technology

BY MARIO CANSECO, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST JANUARY 30, 2015



Vancouver taxi users reported complaints about busy phone lines and long wait times in a recent Insights West poll.

**Photograph by:** Jason Payne, Vancouver Sun

VANCOUVER — During the holiday season, Vancouverites require taxis more than at any other time of the year. We have holiday parties to get to, relatives and friends to visit, and a need to get to places quickly and easily. When the celebrations go well into the night, we cannot rely on SkyTrain or buses to get us home. If we decide to consume alcohol, we require a safer alternative than driving our own vehicles.

This is one of the reasons why I was curious to review how residents felt about their holiday transportation options. A recent Insights West survey looked at the experiences of taxi riders in an attempt to quantify the anecdotal evidence that is often heard when it comes to hired car services in Metro Vancouver.

The main complaint, cited by 30 per cent of taxi riders in December, was that dispatch phone lines were busy when trying to book a cab. Second on the list, at 23 per cent, was the perception that wait times for a cab were unacceptable.

These two issues are directly related to technology. Users believe that there is a better way to connect people who need a ride to someone who can provide it.

Other unpleasant experiences deal with safety. In our survey, 22 per cent of taxi riders reported that their driver was not wearing a seatbelt, and 20 per cent said their driver was using a hand-held cellphone while behind the wheel. This is a markedly high incidence of illegal behaviour for people who are supposed to be vetted and tasked with looking after our safety. A sticker on the back seat window reminds us to buckle up every time we get into a cab, but taxi drivers are exempt from this rule if they travel under 70 km/h.

Here is a different way to look at the safety problem: If a regular driver in B.C. decided to go without a seatbelt and used an electronic device while driving, that person would face fines totalling \$334. Yet one in five taxi drivers were apparently operating this way without a hitch.

Other complaints from taxi riders were related to the experience inside the cab itself, with 18 per cent saying that their cab had a bad smell. And one in six riders (16 per cent) say that their taxi took a longer route than required, and that their drivers drove recklessly. This only adds to the predicament of not following existing guidelines for safety. Our taxi rides are making us uneasy, and costing us more because drivers fail to listen to passengers who may have had a different route in mind.

When the two more-prevalent technology problems are discussed — difficulty getting through to dispatch and long wait times — the de-facto response from the industry is a call for cities to issue more taxi licences. This may be an easy solution, but it completely ignores the other issues that are affecting riders: disregard for the law and discomfort.

Vancouverites who rely on cabs are inherently cosmopolitan. They have experienced rides in other cities and can compare them to the service they get at home. This is one of the reasons why companies that are trying to bring new ideas into the marketplace are being well received by the public. Some people know that the situation can be better.

For all the talk about who can or cannot operate a vehicle to get someone from Point A to Point B, we must remember a key issue: Governments are supposed to minimize bureaucracy. Services like Sober Girls, which sends designated drivers to locations where patrons may have had too many drinks on weekends, operate with little hassle from municipal or provincial overseers. They are seen as a solution to a bigger problem — drunk driving — and not a hindrance to the taxi industry.

The survey results suggest that the public, while not overly critical of the current state of affairs, is keenly aware that their city could be better served. The taxi industry has not made a great effort to engage with users, partly because it has the advantage of a quasi-monopoly.

This leads us to the greatest irony of getting in a cab during the holidays. We may have chosen, wisely, not to expose others to drunk driving after a fun night out, but we are frequently relying on a driver who is breaking the law before he even starts the meter. Would we do business with a company that deliberately disregarded existing rules and regulations 20 per cent of the time? Probably not, if other options were available.

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In a recent online poll, Insights West asked 254 adult residents of Metro Vancouver who had used taxi and/or limo services the question: "In the month of December, did you experience any of the following when seeking taxi service in Metro Vancouver? Select all that apply."

The dispatch phone line was busy: 30%

The wait time was longer than acceptable to me: 23%

My taxi driver was not wearing a seat belt: 22%

My taxi driver was using a hand-held device while driving: 20%

My taxi had a bad smell: 18%

My taxi took a longer route than required: 16%

My taxi driver drove recklessly: 16%

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