

SEASONAL

"Let's be careful out there..."



For all you aficionados of the long-running American cop series "Hill Street Blues" from the eighties, this was the main catchphrase of one Desk Sergeant Esterhaus, who offered these encouraging words at the end of every day's briefing of the policemen and women who were about to go out on duty on the streets. We've used this, or variants of it, for many years ourselves in putting out collections of tips and suggestions

– especially during the festive season – for licensed drivers to stay safe "out there". We appreciate that everybody's "out there" is different; however, we thought it might be beneficial if we updated our driver safety hints and tips to take in developments within the industry over the past few years. So in no particular order, we'll put a few ideas down for staying safe and sane. Yes, you seasoned drivers know all about this stuff... but there are always new drivers whose first Christmas and New Year shift may well be a tad, shall we say, daunting. Hopefully you'll find these pointers of assistance:-

1. Alcohol and drugs



To state the obvious, the use of these substances increases a hundredfold over the festive season. In addition to being alert and aware at all times, especially when you are parked on the street or at a rank, do please remember that all drivers – hackney as well as private hire – are entitled to refuse a fare "without reasonable excuse" if you feel you are at risk. "Reasonable excuse" could include abusive, racist, sexist,

foul mouthed or extremely drunk behaviour; also those who refuse to stop smoking or eating in your vehicle, or had been sick over themselves or soiled themselves.

2. CCTV



By far the most beneficial development to affect the industry. It is such a pity that more subsidies cannot be found to fund in-car CCTV for every single licensed vehicle in the land. Nonetheless, the price of these units has come down dramatically in recent years, and serious consideration should be given to those cameras that are both inward and outward facing, to prevent those premium-hiking false insurance claims.

But mainly, the effect they have had on both driver and passenger safety is immeasurable.

3. Payment of fares



The trend toward credit and debit card payment for fares is spreading big style, for all the obvious reasons – mainly convenience of the passenger. But driver safety also figures heavily in this as well: it means drivers don't have to carry quite so much actual dosh. In any event, never tell customers you have had a good shift. If they ask, be polite but evasive. Keep only a minimum amount of money on you and don't show passengers your cash when giving change. If you do carry cash, stash it around the vehicle in more than one place.

As for the actual fares themselves, it is becoming more and more necessary these days to request fares up front before you set off. This is both allowed, and indeed advocated, by many licensing authorities. In practice, the majority of reasonable (!) passengers are quite willing to pay up front – until and unless they've got tanked up and are irrational about everything. A definite judgment call is required here.

4. General security



Under the umbrella heading of common sense, here are a few suggestions:-

- a. Don't wear expensive watches or jewellery, and make sure that any neck chains break easily.
- b. Read passengers' body language. Make eye contact with passengers when they enter the vehicle. Greeting them is not only good customer service, but it sends a subtle message that you have seen them and can identify them.
- c. Seasoned drivers will always advise newcomers to stick to known regular customers, if possible. Not so simple on the rank; however these days a lot of passengers will phone a specific taxi driver for a pickup. The safety factor works both ways – drivers and passengers alike feel more comfortable if they're known to each other.
- d. Always keep your doors locked. A sad sign of the times and all that, but crucial for your safety especially if you are parked at a rank or on the street, or going through one of the increasing number of "no-go" areas in most communities.
- e. The festive season is notorious for passengers doing a runner. Don't even think about heroics – ie. chasing them for the fare, or even getting out of the car. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred in reports of driver attacks, the most vulnerable driver is the one who got (or was pulled) out of the car.
- f. Another strong 'don't': don't entertain the idea of carrying weapons. Even if something such as a cricket bat is left in your vehicle, hand it in; too often these things are used against drivers by sozzled (or drugged) passengers.
- g. Be aware of passengers who give you vague instructions. Insist on customers giving you a fixed destination before you drive away. If they say, "Just start driving and we will tell you the way", this should be a danger signal. Do not move off and politely advise them that you need an exact address.
- h. Should the passenger suddenly direct you to take a different route

SAFETY

or tell you to “turn here” or “turn there”, this could also be a danger sign and you should immediately alert your dispatcher to the change of address.

5. Emergency procedures



It is crucial for all drivers to have some sort of emergency code, or communication procedure, to alert their operator base (or other drivers) that they are in trouble. Along those lines:-

- Know your location at all times. Always know exactly where you are in case you get into trouble; nobody can help you if they don't know where you are.
- Operators/radio bases should have in place a set of emergency procedures for use in different circumstances. These should be reviewed regularly, in person between drivers and the operator, so that everybody is clear as to what should happen for each circumstance.
- Know what the trouble call signs are; if you do not have this facility, or you are an independent hackney driver who is not on a radio circuit, flash your taxi roof sign to attract attention.
- Keep in contact with your operator/radio base if you have one. Use your radio/PDA to alert someone if you are in trouble.
- We know of many drivers who still have regular garages they use for fuel, and who have worked out an emergency arrangement whereby any licensed vehicle that approaches the garage with its lights flashing, signals to the garage proprietor or attendant to contact the police. It works.

6. CSE awareness



Readers will know that since the Rotherham child sex scandal and others that unfortunately involved licensed drivers in other areas, the proliferation of child sexual exploitation awareness courses around the UK is some sort of pandemic – understandably, as the seriousness of such crimes cannot be minimised.

Many drivers have scoffed at the idea of CSE courses, maintaining that they “are not social workers”. However, the majority who have undertaken these courses state that they have been more than beneficial – particularly in raising awareness of the problem, and possible signs to look for when out and about doing their job. This heightened awareness has to be even more important during the festive season.

7. Get appy!



We ask all our readers who are on a circuit with apps: Have you got regular contact with your base? We're certain we know the answer is yes for the majority of private hire firms that have been going for some years, and have only recently added the app facility for ease and convenience of customer booking.

However, we have to enquire: How does it work for the likes of Uber drivers? For a start, we understand that they are not told the passenger's destination until he/she gets into the car; they merely know the pickup point, and accept or reject that journey when it comes up on their smartphone.

So what if there is a problem with the passenger once they are inside the car? How soon does “the system” know where this car is supposed to be going? And crucially, where can the driver get hold of anybody if there is an emergency during the journey? Can he send a signal to other drivers to alert them that he is in some kind of difficulty? Most significantly, is there anybody at “a base” who can pick up these emergency signals? We genuinely do not know how this works, so if anyone out there can enlighten us on this point, we'd love to hear from you.

8. Health and safety awareness



We spend a lot of time throughout the year having a laugh at ‘Elf ‘n’ Safety’ when the good ol’ Jobsworths (usually council officers) take things to extreme. However, at this time of year it's even more important to look after your own wellbeing, and more difficult sometimes to do just that:-

- Exhaustion: You know the routine... “Just one more job...” Don't do it if it means risking your wellbeing for the sake of one fare; go home in one piece, alert and aware of what's going on.
- Eat sensibly: If you're going into a long shift, stoke up on the healthy carbs, such as pasta – or porridge. (Don't mock – a lot of people like it!)
- Keep on top of licence expiry dates and vehicle testing: This includes the dreaded DBS enhanced record check not being back in time; the medical that must be carried out by a specified facility; the council offices closed over the holiday break; the badge that expired last week; the vehicle they won't book in for a test until a week next Shrove Tuesday as the garage is busy. All these setbacks can be costly, as well as mount up additional pressure and tension when you just don't need it.
- Carry an emergency card: It would be most sensible to have on your person a card with your name, date of birth, blood group, allergy information and a contact number for emergencies – you never know when this information may be needed.

There you have it: our latest set of safety tips and hints for this coming festive season. Let us hope you don't have to worry about any of these things...! – but in case you do, maybe this will have provided a bit of help.

Have a safe, lucrative time... and

Let's be careful out there!

PHTM
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