



By

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One of my professional preoccupations is observing how people use devices and built-in technology in their cars. Yes, I sometimes get paid for it, but just as in other domains in which I do user research, it's become a slight obsession. Add to that the fact that I've always liked talking to cab drivers. I like to know where they came from and hear their stories, especially when they are first-generation Americans, or when they aren't, I just like to chat about local politics, sports, the weather, what have you.

Which brings me to UberX. I've been using this service a lot lately, both for work and personal transportation, and it's blowing me away from a UX standpoint.

UberX is the lower-priced version of [Uber](#), in which private contractors provide their own vehicles for hire. Passengers can order an UberX ride with the tap of a screen once they sign up for Uber account, provide a credit card, and download the app. The mobile app geo-locates them and tells them how long it will take for a driver to pick them up. It shows passengers the driver's name and photo, the type of car he/she owns, and the driver's rating on a 5-pt scale by previous passengers they've driven around. They can even watch their driver's car on a map as it works its way toward them.

## UberX vehicles are experimental labs in customer service

The simple 5-pt rating scale motivates UberX drivers to offer great customer service. Uber as a company watches these ratings and course-corrects any problems or issues. Here are some customer service examples from my rides with UberX over the past two weeks:

1. A driver named Asad offered me bottled water and put fresh flowers in the passenger area. Asad told me he spends up to \$100 a month on providing extra amenities for his passengers to make them feel welcomed and comfortable.
2. Asad also passed me an iPhone charging cable when I noted that my phone was low on battery (first he asked "do you need Android or iPhone?" Then he asked "do you need an iPhone 5 or iPhone 4 cable—I have them both.") On a different ride, a driver named Larry handed the right charging cable back to me without even asking.
3. A driver named William in Chicago noted he routinely monitors traffic and takes alternative routes to get passengers to destinations more quickly. Taxi drivers, in my experience, are not highly motivated to avoid traffic unless they are driving fixed-fare routes such as driving from the airport to downtown.
4. Unlike some of my recent taxi rides, none of my UberX drivers talked on their phones or conducted other business while driving me to my destination.

UberX drivers are innovating in customer service in their cars. I'm sure they are learning from each other and from Uber as a company, but each driver I spoke with seems to be running small UX experiments and tweaking things in their own way to optimize the customer experience. Some are certainly better at it than others, but all drivers I speak with seem committed to a better UX, have positive attitudes throughout the drive, and say great things about Uber as a company. Wow.

## UberX drivers and in-car technology

When I got into Larry's Toyota Avalon to go to the airport, I knew I was in for a treat. Larry has mounted an iPad with Velcro over the center part of his dash and uses this to display Google Maps or the Waze app with real-time traffic and road updates. He alternates between the two, depending on time of day and where he is driving. Larry has two smartphones in his car, one provided by Uber and the other is his personal phone that he uses for other work between rides. He found a great unlimited data plan for his iPad that caps the cost of running maps or streaming music on it all day in his car.

Larry apologized that his other tablets were still in his trunk because he had just upgraded them. Other tablets? He typically has two Windows Surface tablets mounted behind the front seat headrests for his passengers to use. Impressed, I asked Larry why he chose the Surface over iPads. He said that while he loves his iPad, he found that when he let his customers use it, they were reluctant to open apps on their own, or they didn't know exactly what to do once they opened them. With the Windows 8 tiled interface, he customized tiles for weather, sports, news, airline sites, and local interest sites. Customers could click large tiles that were clearly labeled and go directly to content, rather than needing to open an app and then take a second step to get the content desired. Knowing both interfaces intimately, I immediately realized why he made this particular UX decision. Probably without knowing the label, Larry is a UX pro.

## A cashless system and vetted ridership means a better mutual UX

One aspect of Uber that passengers and drivers both like is their cashless payment system. As a passenger, I get an Uber receipt emailed to me immediately after each ride. Digital receipts make my business expense reporting easier, so I like that as a passenger.

An Uber driver recently told me he loves not carrying cash around because it feels far safer to him. Because passengers create accounts within the Uber system and are not anonymous, transacting payments by credit card only makes him feel far less susceptible to be lured for a ride and then robbed of his nightly earnings—something that happens to cab drivers far too often.

Just as passengers rate drivers, UberX drivers also rate passengers, although to see your passenger rating you have to convince a driver to show you or send a request to Uber customer service. This helps drivers and Uber as an organization screen out aggressive, rude, or unruly passengers. Although this aspect of the Uber experience is not obvious on Uber’s customer-facing website, it is an important part of the system.

## Pride of ownership and a better riding experience

I spoke with my recent UberX drivers about how they got into Uber. All had stories about being on a journey to a better life, whether they were driving part-time to fund an education, just starting out as an entrepreneur, or using driving to fund other business ventures.

Let’s suspend for a moment any debate about services such as UberX and Lyft versus taxi companies in terms of safety standards, union protections for workers, and tax payments to municipalities. There are valid arguments on both sides.

To me, the UberX driver story is an American story. One driver, an immigrant from East Africa, told me that he was in a manufacturing job for seven years that he liked, but he never once received a raise. He saved up enough money to buy a nice used car, joined the UberX fleet, and shortly thereafter quit his day job. Now several months later, he has exceeded his earnings in the manufacturing job, and better yet, he feels like he has control over his own future. He noted that he is a poor, uneducated man who spent most of his life in a refugee camp before coming to America. “Where else but here (in the States) can I get an opportunity like this? Now if I work hard and treat my customers well, I earn enough money to support my family. My children can have a better life.”

Indeed, UberX is a mix of a good end-to-end technology UX, great customer service, and entrepreneurial small business owners. What is more American than that?

*John Dirks is a Partner at Blink UX, conducts a variety of user research projects, and has visited so many homes for work that he now claims it’s not real user research unless you can smell what’s for dinner.*