

PUBLIC SUBMISSION – MR. ELRIC NIELSEN RE TAXI SERVICES COMPLAINT

SUMMARY

I work out of Bow Valley College, and I hosted a 3 day meeting in December 2016 with about 20 delegates from my company from all over North America, mostly the USA. They were staying in a hotel in NW Calgary, and meeting daily at BVC. Nightly, they would have excursions to restaurants and fun local activities that I had pre-arranged. There was plenty of time left between events to allow for both travel and rest. As most of the attendees had never been to Calgary before, we had arranged many local fun activities for them to do, with the goal of showing off our city, something I am sure many conference organizers also do.

We had pre-arranged for taxis to deliver the attendees daily from the hotel to BVC for meetings, back to the hotel, and then nightly out for their fun activity and to return. I had contacted Associated to pre-arrange all pickup and drop off information about 2 weeks prior to the conference, and they assured me everything would be taken care of. I confirmed a couple of days prior, and again was told everything would be fine.

Day 1 sort of started smoothly. Sort of. Some of the attendees did not make their flights in, so on day 1 when only 4 cars showed up for the first trip of the day it sort of worked out. I contacted Associated and was reassured there was no need to worry, and that everything was on schedule for the rest of the conference. For the return to hotel that night, it was very problematic. A cab would come, then in 10 minutes another, then in 15 another. My delegates are waiting outside on the street corner for non-existing, pre-arranged cabs. Obviously, this threw the evenings plans into disarray. They were extremely late for dinner, some did not even bother attending. I ended up just calling all sorts of random taxi companies to send whatever taxis I could scrape up. I was not able to contact Associated (I did have 1 phone line with them on hold waiting while I used another phone to call whomever) as I was on hold for an hour. For the evening return to the hotel, again, total disarray. The transportation between venues should have been a 20 minute venture, not a 75 minute ordeal.

That evening I contacted Checker (thinking maybe Associated just dropped the ball repeatedly) to take over my schedule for the remainder of the conference, and they assured me no problem. Checker had a cab stand at the guests' hotel, so I figured that they would have a backup plan if anything went wrong. They were just as bad, no cabs showing up, with me on the phone trying to call every cab company in the city to get a car sent here and there. I did this all day long for day 2, and it was a disaster. Their evening event, which was to be Luge ride at COP, the highlight of the conference, was cancelled as they were late getting there. Of course I still had to pay a lot of money for an event that went unused. After 2 days of nothing but frustration I rented a charter bus for the remainder of the conference, but by then the damage was done.

The aftertaste in the mouths of my guests was that we are a bunch of amateurs in Calgary. It was a complete embarrassment. Their conference, which should have enabled me to show off Calgary, was a disaster solely because of the taxi issue. Every other local company delivered except the cab

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companies, and all of the cab companies were equally bad. This city should really be embarrassed about how this industry fails over and over again to efficiently meet the needs of its patrons. Having lived here for all my life, I have seen this issue linger for a decade. I wasted thousands of dollars on events that my attendees did not get to experience. My guests' perception of Calgary is poor, as was their experience. I am sure they didn't enjoy standing on the street corner in the cold or waiting on hold for an hour.

As I believe the taxi industry itself here doesn't care to address this issue, perhaps if it is looked at from a perspective of how this affects our conference business and tourism, maybe then something might change. As it is for me, I wouldn't risk a taxi going forward. I'll spend the \$800 on a shuttle long before I trust a taxi company. Of course, I won't have to make this call as my attendees will never consider coming here again. Honestly, I'd love to see the Uber's of the world just take over completely (Some of my American attendees used Uber and got rides quickly), they seem to have the needs of their guests in mind, and there does come a point when you just have to say "It's time to let someone else have a try". I think the public demand for Uber has stated such.

I'd be happy to attend a commission meeting and share this experience.

- **Pre-Arranged Trips:** It is reasonable to assume that anyone who pre-arranges a cab feels it is important that they get one – they did take the time to book ahead. People who pre-arrange cabs likely, and rightly so, believe that this is a reservation and that a cab will be there as scheduled.
 - I have been told a pre-arrangement is not a guarantee. The difference between a disclaimer and an excuse is the time of the delivery. I was never cautioned prior that there was no guarantee, but I was most certainly told this many times after failure of delivery.
 - Once a company accepts a pre-arrangement, it shoulders responsibility to ensure it occurs, whether they accept this or not. I do, as the public at large does, expect them to overcome obstacles to meet their obligations. They seem to suggest that if they say it is not a guarantee, then they have absolved themselves of any accountability.
 - If I knew it was not a guarantee, just that someone would contact a cab for me 10 minutes before pickup time I would have done it myself. At least then I would have the benefit of being able to contact multiple companies, and widen my field of opportunity. I also would have started early considering the following....
- **Disclaimer:** The taxi companies suggest they provide a disclaimer that pre-arrangements are not guarantees. In normal business practices there is a responsibility to communicate a disclaimer to the other party. At no point in any of my pre-booking calls was I told of any such disclaimer, meaning from a legal perspective, no such disclaimer exists in my case and as such, perhaps I should pursue damages.
- **Weather:** I have been told that the weather was bad, and resulted in my arrangement falling apart. Cold weather is not new in Calgary. I am not an expert in the cab industry, but I do think that those in the industry can predict and react accordingly to deliver their services in a reasonable manner considering all factors that affect their business. If weather is causing delays

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in cabs, one would think pre-arranged pickups might be arranged earlier than usual to accommodate such delays. Many businesses manage to react to weather related business flows such as this – snow removal companies, airlines etc.

- **Special Events:** I was told that Calgary Flames hockey games occurred and made it a busy night. Hockey games have been occurring in Calgary since 1982, and are always scheduled well in advance. Other businesses schedule and plan accordingly and manage to accommodate any change in business hockey games bring to their business, as well as other factors. Taxi Companies should be expected to be able to manage taxi availability suitably for scheduled events, and held accountable when they fail to do so. Certainly it is just plain bad business to expect guests to be experts in business factors before those in the related service industry.
- **Lack of Available Vehicles:** I was told there are not enough cars on the road to meet the demand at peak times. There has been much media attention to this over the years. Again, many businesses have time of day (restaurants, Calgary Transit) and seasonal (Ski resorts, tourism, Calgary Stampede) fluctuations, and manage to operate their businesses to meet irregular demand. Most are not regulated or monopolized and free competition creates businesses that compete to satisfy users. Some (Calgary Transit) are services, and do a good job of meeting needs of users. I am reminded of the old ALCB Liquor store days, I remember on long weekends my parents might wait an hour just to get into the store. Privatization lead to the increase in liquor stores, and sure seems to have solved that problem.
- **Drivers' Independence:** I was told that drivers have the freedom to accept or decline pickups, and getting a car to accept my request were not always accepted, that drivers are independent. Many jurisdictions (NYC) have laws that make it illegal for a cab to refuse a pickup request. I think a request made by a dispatcher is the same as a request made on a street corner, and should not be able to be refused. The dispatcher on the phone sounded like she could see a map of where available cars were located, so if I call Checker, I should be able to get its closest available car everytime.
- **Calling Multiple Taxi Companies:** Once I started contacting every cab company that would answer the phone, I was told not to over order cabs, but was not assured anything would show up, either. While I appreciate cab companies frustration with guests who disappear, this is only a result of people resorting to calling many cabs because they do not trust that one may show up or not. This is not a problem the public brings upon the cab companies, but a problem the cab companies themselves are wholly responsible for. People don't buy 2 plane tickets, just in case. People don't book reservations at 2 restaurants, just in case. People don't do this because they trust their airlines and restaurants.
- **Predicting Wait Times:** I assume wait times are somewhat predictable by someone with experience in the industry. Cabs electronically confirm pickups, so they must know what their current wait times are, and should be able to manage pre-arranged pickups accordingly, and held accountable when they fail to do so. I recently booked a restaurant meal for 16 people. I did so by going to the restaurant and telling the teenaged hostess, and she wrote it into a book. On the day of my arrival, another teenaged hostess read the book, and blocked off tables in a

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group ahead of time to ensure my group was accommodated. I assume some tables sat unused for a while as they arranged 5 tables to become vacant. I appreciate a business that not only takes responsibility to deliver what they have promised, but also to use their experience to manage the factors that pose challenges.

- **Filing a Complaint:** To get my concerns heard has been a very time-consuming ordeal. I have contacted Taxi companies, 311, members of the LTAC etc. Cab companies ignored it completely. Most gave little more than an ear for a moment, and only with my dogged determination did I not give up along the way. This process likely makes most users not bother bringing complaints forward. I believe the satisfaction level on the street is much lower than the LTAC or the cab companies would admit.
- Ideally, cab companies themselves would solve this problem. Most industries work very hard to please their consumers, and are always improving. Obviously, regulating the industry has eliminated the competitive nature of the companies that usually drives user satisfaction. Most industries don't require an oversight commission as the wallets of its users keep them plenty accountable.

My Recommendations

- **If pre-arrangements are not guaranteed communicate this to all guests prior; or guarantee pickups; or stop taking pre-arrangements altogether.**
- **If weather is causing delays in cabs, one would think pre-arranged pickups might be arranged earlier than usual to accommodate such delays.**
- **Taxi Companies should be expected to be able to manage taxi availability suitably for scheduled events, and held accountable when they fail to do so.**
- **I think a request made by a dispatcher is the same as a request made on a street corner, and should not be able to be refused by way of law.**

One would expect if the companies are not going to address poor service, an oversight commission would see to it that concerns are not only heard, but corrected and that action is taken. Most industries don't require an oversight commission as the wallets of its users keep them plenty accountable. I am sure I am not the first person with a complaint, one needs to do little more than check google reviews for local taxi companies to find many hundreds of complaints of poor and rude service.

What concerns me is that problems have been ongoing for so long and the needle needs to move a lot more than marginally. I cannot profess to know the ins and outs of the taxi industry better than the assembled group today, but at this point drastic change needs to occur both to achieve the desired outcome, and to restore confidence by the public at large.

SUBMISSIONS PRESENTED BY: Mr. Elric Nielsen, member of the public