

Ticket to Ride

With a new carpool service, you can text your way home **BY MARK ANDERSON**



IT'S A SOLUTION any 14-year-old would love: The challenges of foreign oil dependency, global warming, and gridlock are not so big that you can't text-message your way out of them.

Today in Liverpool, England, if you're downtown at a pub and want to get back to your hotel on the other side of town, you can send a text message containing the postal code of your destination to 83994, and it's as good as done. By punching a dozen buttons on your cell phone, you've contacted the fledgling cab service called Texxi. ("The taxi you text.") The company, which owns no cars and employs no drivers, acts like an automated travel agent for your ride home: Its computer receives your request and finds other Texxi users whose pickup and destination points are roughly the same, and it summons a single cab from one of the city's cab companies for everyone to share.

The cost for this Texxi ride with, say, two or three other passengers is less than £4.6 (about \$9) each, instead of the £9 (about \$18) or more that it would cost to hire a cab solo, and the cab company, on average, earns more total fare per ride. The savings of fuel, pollution, and congestion are at

least as much as if you had arranged your own carpool back to your hotel.

Plus, perhaps the biggest drawback of taking a cab—standing outside and waiting—is eliminated: Each passenger receives a text message the moment their ride has arrived. Users can even set up their own Texxi groups to preferentially seek out ideal fellow passengers.

Eric Masaba, inventor of the Texxi system and managing director of its Liverpool pilot program, says that the shared-cab system he's created could easily be replicated for 9-to-5ers in Raleigh, North Carolina, or football fans in Brisbane, Australia, or—with a large enough passenger base to work from—a denizen of any city going anywhere within that greater metro area at any time. "When I calculated how much this idea is worth on the world market, I couldn't believe it," he says. "I kept coming up with figures in the hundreds of billions or trillions of dollars."

Masaba's lightbulb moment came in 2003, after he had spent more than a decade working as a consultant on problems, in economic wonk-speak, of "maximizing resource efficiency in power grids and in the wake of

massive corporate collapses"—such as the Enron implosion of 2001. "It just dawned on me that if we use the existing infrastructure rather than buy a new one, we could get a city up and running very quickly."

Make no mistake about it: Masaba has big plans for his start-up model, and is now schmoozing with entrepreneurs and potential investors around the world to ensure that someday soon you, too, will be able to text for your taxi.

The idea does have a few hurdles to jump—the main one being the very method that the call system works with. To make something like Texxi work, the majority of a city's residents, not just cell-phone savvy teenagers, needs to be familiar with text messaging (that heretofore unexplored menu option on your phone that lets you send short text messages to other cell phone users). Overall, Americans have not yet caught the texting bug. When asked in December 2005 if they would be sending a "Happy New Year" text message to anyone, 90 percent of Spanish respondents, 88 percent of Germans, and 92 percent of Italians surveyed said yes—compared to just 35 percent of Americans.

But the benefits of a Texxi-like system, once established, are quite attractive. The program would require no public subsidies or infrastructure, and would cut down congestion and emissions in the highest density regions and during the busiest times of the day. "The Texxi model is intriguing because it seems to be addressing some of the barriers about ride-sharing," says Susan Shaheen, a transportation expert at the University of California, Berkeley. One key benefit is that it can gather a critical mass of riders. "If they have a phone, they send a text message, and there you go."

The Liverpool model, where one in five residents are students and a massive club scene produces a predictable glut of passengers on Fridays and Saturdays, could be implemented differently in other areas. The cab service could be organized around schools, shopping, commuting, or large events, Masaba says.

The mass-market potential of Texxi has some investors already excited about setting up their own franchises. Masaba says he's in touch with potential backers in Australia,

where texting is about as popular as it is in Europe, as well as stateside. Officials and investors in Texas, California, and North Carolina are looking to get involved—and inquiries have come from both sides of the political aisle, with Masaba fielding recent e-mails from former employees of both the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations.

A British businessman, Joe Olmi of TaxiBus, has also been in touch with Masaba on promoting a similar but more ambitious plan aimed at out-greening public transit. Olmi proposes publicly owned fleets of GPS-enabled shuttles that are able to change their routes on the fly as new users request rides

with their cell phones. Olmi's version could be a subsidized transit system, with its own fleet of vans and drivers in its employ.

"The technology is not a complex issue," Olmi says. "There's no great rocket science to it: GPS street navigation is just a bolt-on component. Mobile phone networks are already set up. Minibuses already exist."

All that's needed are a handful of innovators to put these components together in the right way. Then, with a system like TaxiBus or Texxi in town, jumpstarting an eco-transportation revolution would just require a cell phone—and two green thumbs to punch those tiny keys. ☺

A GREENER OPTION

> As much as 50 percent of congestion in cities is caused by people looking for parking, some studies estimate. Taxi-sharing systems such as Texxi and TaxiBus would reduce this gridlock.

> According to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, 10 trillion empty-seat miles are produced by American vehicles every year because most cars on the road are not fully occupied. This figure translates to 123 billion gallons of gas wasted and 1.2 billion tons of excess carbon dioxide emissions. Ride-sharing programs would increase the number of occupied seats per vehicle on the road.

> As Charles Lave of the University of California, Irvine has pointed out, empty seats in America's highway vehicles constitute the greatest oil reserve in the world. —M.A.