

Suggested Methods for Dealing with Difficult Taxi Customers

1. Keep Safe

The most important priority in the face of a confrontational and hostile individual is to protect yourself. Normally, if you don't feel comfortable with a situation, you should leave and seek help and support if necessary. However, as a Taxi or PHV Driver, once the passenger is in the vehicle, leaving is usually not an option, so you have to remain and deal with the situation you are presented with in an intelligent way and consider the following skills and strategies.

2. Stay in Your Space and Maintain Your Options

Remember, you don't need this hassle. Your time is valuable, you are there to work and earn money and hopefully enjoy your work environment, and your happiness and wellbeing is top priority. Unless there's something important at stake, don't waste time pointlessly grappling with a customer who's negatively entrenched. Whether you're dealing with an angry person who has just had a fall out with a partner or a bad day, someone who is high on drugs, or a person who has had too much alcohol, keep a healthy distance physically and mentally and stay in your bubble, your cylinder of space, and avoid engagement unless absolutely forced to do so, don't be a hero, you won't get a medal.

There are times when you may feel like you're "stuck" with a very difficult person, and there's "no way out." In these situations, think outside the box. When any new customer enters your vehicle, you need to perform a risk assessment. This would be done by talking to the customer, so the first thing you always ask anyway is where they want to travel to, so then discuss price, maybe even the route and expected travel time, and consider asking for the money up front – you will be able to draw a quick conclusion as to the mental state of the customer and their possible intentions, and decide whether to continue on or abort the situation. Also, if you are on the Taxi Rank or a public area, you will not be far from others who may be able to offer support if needed. One of the big benefits of getting payment up front is that it removes the "object of power" from the situation, giving the customer nothing to really hold over you should they be so inclined, freeing you to just drive and drop them off. Talk to trusted friends and colleagues about different courses of action, with your personal wellbeing as the number one priority. We're never stuck unless we have blinkers on, keep your options open and work smart.

3. Keep Your Cool and Avoid Escalation

One of the most common characteristics of confrontational and hostile individuals is that they project their aggression to "push your buttons" and knock you off balance. By doing so, they create an advantage from which they can exploit your weaknesses. So, if you are faced with a difficult individual, one of the most important rules of thumb is to keep your cool. The less reactive you are to provocations, the more you can use your better judgment to handle the situation and stay in control.

When you are faced with a challenging customer, before you say or do something you might later regret, take a deep breath and count to ten. In many instances, by the time you reach ten, you would have regained composure, and figured out a better response to the issue, so that you can reduce the problem, instead of exacerbating it further. The last thing you want is to make the situation worse, it's your job, nothing personal, so you want to do everything you can to defuse the situation quickly.

4. Depersonalise the Situation, be Proactive not Reactive

"Don't take anything personally, what others say and do is often a projection of their own reality. If you can be immune to the opinions and actions of others, you can avoid being the victim of cruel intentions."

Being mindful about the nature of confrontational and hostile people can help us to depersonalise the situation and change from being reactive to proactive. Remember that, unless the customer knows you and is coming at you from a personal perspective, then your customer is probably mentally off balance due to intoxication or such, so we need to perhaps consider a slightly parental approach, such as when you deal with a screaming baby, and seek to calm the situation as quickly as possible.

On the other hand, there is always the possible time when you are confronted with a customer who has premeditated criminal intent such as robbing you of your hard-earned money. Consider keeping the bulk of your cash hidden in an obscure place, or regularly drop it off at the office or at home when passing. Always minimise your potential losses, so if someone does hold you at knife point say, then give them the money, it's not worth dying for, and if it's just your float they've had then it's not quite so bad. Don't risk a trip to A&E or the fiery gates of hell! It really is not worth it – stay alive, stay safe – it's only money!

Also, do not leave your vehicle with the key in the ignition, think proactively, prevention is better than the painful clean up. In these current times we are finding it harder rely on the Police for help and support with their resources so stretched, so empower yourself by being prepared and working smart.

Remind yourself that most chronically confrontational and hostile people suffer within, and mindfulness of their struggles can help you handle them with more detachment and equanimity, even if it is just the effects of alcohol. Their problems and personal issues are none of your business, so don't let them make it your business, or take it out on you either.

5. Utilize Assertive and Effective Communication

Often, an individual who is chronically confrontational and hostile simply isn't being him or herself. As mentioned before, this could be down to emotional stress or most commonly for us, intoxication effecting their mood and behaviour.

Try to stay in control of the of the situation as much as possible by being polite and professional. Use a calm voice and try to avoid trigger words such as a simple “NO”, and use phrases like “I am sorry, I am not able to do that”. Where possible, take every word out of your head and look at it before you speak it, and do not offer to do anything you do not intend to honour.

Think of this aggressive customer as a ticking bomb which can be diffused by passing the mind game test, and the key to passing the test is to remain calm and non-reactive by not engaging in the mind game in the first place, give them nowhere to go with it. The moment you engage in the mind game, it’s much harder to back track and you risk a much longer and drawn out situation.

Consider using respectfully neutral references, it is much easier to maintain a professional and impersonal stance by referring to the customer as “Sir” or “Madam” or “Miss”, as often terms such as “mate”, “buddy” or “love” can prove inflammatory.

Think of how the Police talk to people, referring to their prospect/target as “Sir” or “Madam” creates and maintains that professional divide allowing them to depersonalise from the situation in order to lay down and enforce their views and opinions under the law, and they can also not be accused of being rude or impolite.

6. Standing Up to Bullies (Safely)

The most important thing to keep in mind about bullies is that they pick on those whom they perceive as weaker, so as long as you remain passive and compliant, you make yourself a target. Many bullies are also cowards on the inside. When their victims begin to show backbone and stand up for their rights, the bully will often back down. This is just as true in domestic and work environments as it is in school playgrounds – it’s not just the customers who can be like this, you may have had confrontation from a fellow Taxi or PHV Driver as well?

On an empathetic note, studies show that many bullies are victims of violence themselves. This in no way excuses bullying behaviour but may help you to consider the bully in a much more calm and composed manner.

When people don't like themselves very much, or when they feel you are better than them, they feel they have to make up for it. The classic bully has usually started out as a victim, and that bullying is often not to do with you, but actually it’s the bully who's insecure.

When standing up to bullies (in situations where something important is at stake), be sure to try and place yourself in a position where you can be safe, whether it’s standing tall on your own, having other people present to witness and support, or keeping a paper trail of the bully’s inappropriate behaviour.

In cases of physical, verbal, or emotional abuse, consult with counselling, licensing and law enforcement on the matter. It’s very important to stand up to bullies, and you don’t have to do it alone so don’t.

It is perhaps also worthy to consider the possible mind set of even the most sober of customers when they use a taxi service. The role of a Taxi or PHV Driver is very often perceived as a very low and subservient position, and some people who have bullying tendencies can find this very empowering – “just shut up and drive, I’m paying you aren’t I?” Again, performing that initial risk assessment, agreeing the precise journey and asking for the money up front may be a good idea here also. Just because we are performing a subservient role does not give them the right to treat us in whatever way they like and speak to us in a demeaning and derogatory way, thus posing a real threat to our emotional wellbeing.

Remember, you control your work space and have the right to refuse a customer if you feel threatened in any way, whether that is the threat of verbal or physical abuse, or even from a personal hygiene perspective – if someone tries to enter your taxi and they absolutely stink, it could be vomit, incontinence or a case of extremely bad personal hygiene, either way you have to protect your own health and this in itself poses severe potential health risks, not to mention the further health risks to your family when you then take it home with you.

You have the right to maintain a safe and comfortable working environment for yourself and protect your wellbeing, just remember to make a record of ANY such situations or conversations with customers should you ever need to explain your actions to Licensing or the Police; in health care they say **“if it’s not written down, it didn’t happen”**, so keep a suitable incident log book in your vehicle and maintain accurate and appropriate records at all times.

8. Evidence is Key

Remember that evidence is key. With Police resources stretched and the CPS considering what to prosecute based on probability of success and public interest, you need to provide as much conclusive evidence as possible, but it can harm your position if you have acted in a questionable way yourself. Keep records and save CCTV and report it to the appropriate authorities keeping copies for yourself and maintain a paper trail at all times. Most important of all work smart and be safe!