

# Is Lyft too friendly to battle Uber?

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Matt Peterson has developed a customer base by picking up strippers.

To clarify: Peterson is a Lyft driver who works very late night (or early morning) hours, and several young women who work at Pittsburgh-area adult entertainment clubs arrange rides with him when their shifts end at 2 or 3 a.m.

"They feel safe with me," Peterson said. He claims it's partly because he's gay, so the women know he won't be trying to hit on them, and partly because he just knows how to read people.

"You can tell within the first 30 seconds or so whether someone wants to chat or whether they want to be left alone in the back seat," he said. "I'll give anyone a ride, but I try to make sure to respect how they want the ride to go."

There's no such thing as a typical Lyft driver, as the company wants its drivers to be quirky and personable, but Peterson might just be a prototypical one: He's given more than 1,260 rides, and has a 4.95 rating (out of a possible 5). Lyft, he said, started out as a way to make some extra cash, but blossomed into a nearly full-time gig bringing in \$1,000 a week, allowing him ample time to work on his dissertation.

The San Francisco company introduced itself in 2012 as "your friend with a car," and founders Logan Green and John Zimmer worked to brand Lyft as fun and friendly.

Under the original vision, every Lyft ride would be a little different, with drivers encouraged to customize their cars for a unique rider experience. For instance in Pittsburgh, a Hello Kitty-themed Lyft vehicle is a unicorn of sorts; everyone talks about it and rides in it are highly sought after.

Then, of course, there were the pink mustaches on every car, and the encouraged fist bumps between drivers and riders that differentiated Lyft from its larger, more businesslike rival Uber. Passengers were also urged to feel free to sit in the front seat, almost unheard of in other car-for-hire services.

Many of these original quirks have been toned down in recent months, with the company doing away with the large pink mustaches and presenting the fist bumps and the passenger seating arrangements as optional choices.

"A few weeks ago, we sent out an email to all passengers highlighting a few practices that are part of the Lyft experience," said spokeswoman Paige Thelen.

"Questions often come up about how the Lyft community works, so we wanted to have fun with it for our newest passengers and make it clear that we want passengers to be comfortable - whether that means sitting in the back seat or greeting your driver with the classic Lyft fist bump."

All of those things, Thelen noted, were always optional.

While the company still has love for the pink mustache, she said Lyft has "evolved" its use into a smaller, pink "cuddlestache" which now rests on drivers' dashboards.

"The pink carstache was a great way to spread the word about Lyft as we

were rapidly scaling in new markets," Thelen said. "With the cuddlestache, we're exploring ways to evolve the icon and the brand. We stopped shipping the pink carstaches a few months ago."

Uber has had several high-profile controversies in recent months, with a top executive suggesting the company go after a reporter who criticized it. More seriously, two Uber drivers in New Delhi and Boston have been charged with raping female passengers in separate incidents. U.S. and international cities have pushed back harder against Uber's relentless push into new markets, which often means skirting or avoiding local regulations.

Lyft, which rolled into Pittsburgh about a week ahead of Uber, has so far not positioned itself to capitalize on its rival's woes.

It is much smaller, valued at about \$700 million to Uber's \$40 billion. But its lack of public relations response has puzzled many industry watchers, and New York Times columnist Nick Bilton asked in a column whether Lyft was "too cute" to fight Uber.

The much bigger Uber has been accused of aggressive tactics against Lyft, including calling, then canceling, hundreds of rides at once in a given area, as well as actively recruiting Lyft drivers. Zimmer said at a tech conference last month that he believes Uber and Lyft can coexist.

In its quest for growth, some drivers who were enthusiastic about Lyft in the beginning found changes to its app and its pricing structure to be confusing and ultimately not as rewarding as they hoped.

"In the beginning, the money was great, but as they played the low-price game, it was few and far between," said former driver Will Young. "Even during peak hours, it could be really hit or miss."

Young, who said he still uses Lyft as a passenger, said he never considered switching to Uber.

"I love the fun-loving part of Lyft," he said. "But I think they really need to find their own path rather than worrying about the competition. I met so many awesome people driving for Lyft as other drivers and passengers. That was the coolest part."

A fair number of drivers work for both companies, often during the same shift, since as independent contractors they're not bound to either exclusively. Peterson, however, said Lyft is more his speed.

"I'm not a very corporate guy," he said. "Uber drivers are more Mt. Lebanon, but Lyft drivers, we're more Bloomfield and Lawrenceville. We have a lot more room to be creative."

He has learned some tricks in the five months or so he's been a Lyft driver. He says a roadside assistance program like AAA is crucial, and, if you're going to be going after the weekend bar crowd, so is a bucket.

"I probably have someone throw up in my car once a week," he said with a chuckle. Lyft pays for the cost of cleaning [drivers'](#) cars after a customer makes a mess, but Peterson notes that such an event has lingering effects and can shut him down for the rest of the evening.

So he's learned to watch for the telltale signs and has a bucket at the ready for queasy passengers.

"They always appreciate it," he said.

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