

# HMA

**HIDDEN MARKETING ASSETS**

# University

INTERVIEW SERIES

## Marketing Lessons From A Colorado Taxi Driver

*Michael Senoff Interviews*

*Business Owner & Marketing Expert John Barnes*

Dear Student,

I'm Michael Senoff, founder and CEO of [HardToFindSeminars.com](http://HardToFindSeminars.com).

For the last five years, I've interviewed the world's best business and marketing minds.

And along the way, I've created a successful home-based publishing business all from my two-car garage.

When my first child was born, he was very sick, and it was then that I knew I had to have a business that I could operate from home.

Now, my challenge is to build the world's largest free resource for online, downloadable audio business interviews.

I knew that I needed a site that contained strategies, solutions, and inside information to help you operate more efficiently

I've learned a lot in the last five years, and today I'm going to show you the skills that you need to survive.

It is my mission, to assist those that are very busy with their careers

And to really make my site different from every other audio content site on the web, I have decided to give you access to this information in a downloadable format.

Now, let's get going.

Michael Senoff

*Michael Senoff*

Founder & CEO: [www.hardtfindseminars.com](http://www.hardtfindseminars.com)

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## *The Ultimate Taxi Marketing Seminar*

### **Marketing Lessons From A Colorado Taxi Driver**

# **Learn How He Transformed An Ordinary Taxi Cab Into The "Ultimate Magical Mystery Money Making Tour Business."**

Born on Halloween, 1983, John's vision started modestly with flashlights, eerily-lit fog, Star Trek lights on the dash, a good sound system, and some strategically-placed tin foil. Today John Barnes bills his cab as the only music studio, nightclub, planetarium, toy store, and Internet taxi on the planet! It's a rock & roll concert, roller coaster ride, magic show, movie ride, laser light show, and photo shoot.

From the front seat of his 1978 Checker Cab, Barnes orchestrates a sophisticated in-taxi light show, complete with 9 lasers, 14 miniature stage lights, a revolving disco ball, and a \$2,000 haze machine AND runs a Web site.

The ride also includes toys, photos on CD, rainbow glasses, and a photo page on his world-famous site. Ringo Starr, George Lucas, Jimmy Buffet, Clint Eastwood, Bob Dole, Michael Eisner, Michael Douglas, and Kevin Costner are among the many notables who have enjoyed this magical, mystery tour.

In this interview, travel along with John as he describes his journey from novice Checker Cab taxi driver in Aspen, providing an entertaining ride, to purveyor of an other worldly, high-tech experience of a lifetime.

John attributes much of his success to successfully leveraging media attention, rabid devotion to cutting-edge technology, and building enduring and very memorable relationships. In this interview you learn how to:

- Develop relationships to build repeat business – John made friends with other cabbies, the dispatcher, and cops by helping them meet their needs; he treated customers like friends, giving free rides, leaving the meter off, and knowing where they lived, and where they wanted to go.
- Focus on the unique – instead of just a ride, John sells fun and entertainment, always trying to boost his smileage (smiles per gallon). His guarantee: either you have fun or there's no charge.

- Profitably manage the media for productive publicity - The Ultimate Cab creates a buzz, through strong word of mouth, celebrities, the Internet and the news and entertainment media.
- Leverage your core business into multiple revenue streams – the Ultimate Cab is central to the Trunk Boutique memorabilia, the web site, and media fees.
- And much, much more!

See how John injects a commonplace chore with his passion for entertainment and his fascination with technology and turns it into a unique and unforgettable experience. Take a virtual ride with John Barnes and discover the secrets of his magic touch. And don't forget to visit [www.ultimatetaxie.com](http://www.ultimatetaxie.com) And the next time you're in Aspen, tell him Michael Senoff sent you.

*Hi, I'm Michael Senoff, founder and CEO of [HardToFindSeminars.com](http://HardToFindSeminars.com). For the last five years I've interviewed the world's best business and marketing minds. Along the way, I've created a successful publishing business all from home from my two car garage. When my first child was born he was very sick and it was then that I knew I had to have a business that I could operate from home.*

*Now my challenge is to build the world's largest free resource for on-line, downloadable, audio business interviews. I knew I needed a site that contained strategies, solutions and inside angles to help you live better, to save and make more money, to stay healthier and to get more out of life.*

*I've learned a lot in the last five years and today I'm going to show you the skills you need to survive.*

John: People would step into the car with reverb and the big arena sound and I'd say, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Ultimate Taxi. The World's only recording studio, theater, night club, planetarium, toy store taxi cab!" And I'd have a sound track of thousands of people cheering and stuff. And I would say, "Thank you, thank you. Hold your applause, please!"

*Hi, it's Michael Senoff with Michael Senoff's [HardToFindSeminars.com](http://HardToFindSeminars.com). The title of this interview is called, "How an Aspen, Colorado Taxi Driver transformed an ordinary taxi into the ultimate magical mystery money making tour." The Ultimate Taxi was born on Halloween night 1983. John Barnes' vision started modestly with a few flash lights, some dry ice, Star Trek light on the dash and a good sound system and some strategically placed Reynolds tin foil. The rest is history.*

*Today John Barnes bills his taxi as the only music studio, night club, planetarium, toy store and Internet taxi on the planet. It's a rock and roll concert, roller coaster ride, magic show, movie ride, laser light show and photo shoot. From the front seat of his*

*1978 Checker Cab, Barns orchestrated a sophisticated, in-taxi light show, complete with nine lasers, 14 miniature stage lights, a revolving disco ball and a \$2,000 haze machine. The ride also includes toys, rainbow glasses, and photo page on his world famous Web site, [www.ultimatetaxi.com](http://www.ultimatetaxi.com).*

*Famous celebrities like Ringo Starr, George Lucas, Jimmy Buffet, Clint Eastwood, Bob Dole, Michael Eisner, Michael Douglas and Kevin Costner are among just a few who have enjoyed his magical mystery tour. In this interview you're going to learn and travel along with John as he describes his journey from novice taxi driver in Aspen, providing an entertaining ride to purveyor of an other worldly, high tech experience of a lifetime.*

*You'll also hear how John successfully leverages free media attention and his cutting edge technology to brand an unforgettable experience in the minds of his customers. You'll also learn how this not so ordinary taxi driver markets his business using these universal business building lessons. Lessons that anyone can take to their own business.*

*For instance; develop a relationship to build repeat business. John made friends with other cabbies and dispatchers and cops by helping them meet their needs. He treated customers like friends, giving away free rides, leaving the meter off and knowing where they lived and where they wanted to go. He remembered names. He also focused on the unique instead of just a ride. John sells fun and entertainment always trying to boost his "smilage," that's smiles per gallon, his guarantee that either you have fun or there is no charge.*

*Leverage your core business multiple revenue streams. The Ultimate Cab is central to the trunk boutique of the memorabilia, the Web site and media fees, and much, much more. You can come with us and take a virtual ride and discover the secrets of his magic touch. And don't forget to visit his Web site, [ultimatetaxi.com](http://www.ultimatetaxi.com). The next time you are in Aspen, tell him Michael Senoff sent you. Now, let's get going.*

Michael: How on earth did you come up with this concept? When was the germination of this idea and how did it all start?

John: In the mid-80s I began driving a taxi cab in Aspen, which is a small community of 5,000 or 6,000 people.

Michael: Had you lived there for a long time or near the area?

John: I had lived there from about 1980 to about 1984. I had done a variety of jobs. I worked as a night auditor at a hotel and I was a breakfast and lunch cook and I worked for the ski patrol and I worked for a guy that sold vending machines. I just did a variety of jobs in the service industry and one day I was cooking breakfast and lunch and one of the dispatchers from the cab company came in and said, "Hey, John, Fred would like to sell his cab and get out of town. It's a great job, why don't you take it." I

said to myself, “Well, I’m getting kind of tired of getting up at 5:00 in the morning to cook breakfast, it’s getting cold out as we’re getting into September.” So I bought Fred’s cab, which was an old, yellow New York Checker Taxi Cab with a great sound system in it.

Michael: How much did you pay for it?

John: I paid \$5,500 for the taxi.

Michael: Okay, did that come with the rights to be a cabbie in Aspen?

John: The way it worked in Aspen was that if you were approved by the owner of the cab company you could join the cab company and pay a weekly fee that would cover the licensing, insurance and the dispatching. You were basically kind of a private contractor. You paid for your own gas and repairs and kept up your own car so there wasn’t really like a medallion system where had to buy into a Statewide program that would allow you to be a taxi driver.

Michael: How many yellow cabs were there in Aspen at that time?

John: Oh, maybe 50 or 60.

Michael: Once you bought it, what did you have to do? How did you get prepared to becoming a cabbie?

John: You know when I first started driving a cab I think the first night I drove was Halloween night, which is a real crazy night, everybody dresses up, everybody that goes to work dresses up and it’s just insane. I kind of decked the taxi up a little bit. I immediately realized that it was more than a job; it was almost like driving in a movie.

Michael: So because it was Halloween you wanted to kind of do something to the cab, spruce it up a little bit, it’s Halloween let’s have a little fun on my first night, right?

John: Exactly.

Michael: How did you deck it up that very first night?

John: You know I think I put some flashlights on the floor of the car underneath my seat and I put some orange gel coloring on the front of the lights so that there was orange light on the floor of the cab and I bought some dry ice and I kind of poured fog onto the floor so that when you stepped into the cab you stepped into a cab with orange fog on the floor for Halloween.

I think I put some aluminum foil over the top and kind of made it look like a space ship.

Michael: But your intentions really were for going just for Halloween, right?

John: I was just trying to basically make the night fun for myself as well as my customers and from that night on the people who would get into my car, you know, they never forgot how I'd made the cab so much fun on Halloween.

Michael: Why? Because you'd have repeat customers and they would talk about that?

John: Exactly. There were two schools of thought on how to drive a cab; one was to work the airport and the tourists and get in line at the airport and wait for the next plane to come in which was about every hour. Hopefully you'd load off the plane and get a decent fair up to Snow Mass, which was about 10 miles away or Aspen, which was about 5 miles away.

The other school of thought was you stayed in town and took the bartenders to work and the waitresses' home. The airport really didn't run after sunset back then, so the evening shift was more driving the locals to and from work and taking people home from the bars and things like that. You got better tips, but it was a little bit more unsteady.

I definitely thought, gee, if you can make yourself stand out in a small town so everybody remembers you, not everybody may like you, but everyone remembers you. It seems like you can always be good for business because if someone is at a party and someone else says, "Oh, can you call me a cab," someone is going to perk up, "Oh, let me call John. His cab is so much more fun than everybody else's." So I figured if I made my job really fun and blurred the distinction between work and play, like maybe its fun for me too, that it could only be good for business in a small town.

Michael: So you're thinking how can I make more money with my new business?

John: Well, yes, I wanted to make more money. It was an unusual job where, you know, if you drove by the movie theater and you saw a movie that you wanted to watch, you could say, "I'm going to take a break for a couple of hours," and park the car and go in and go to the movies and then when the movie was over you could come on back out and call the dispatchers and say, "I'm back in the hack," and they give you a fare.



Michael: So you have your dispatcher, you have a radio and when you are available you let the dispatcher know and if they have a call that comes in and they need someone who needs a ride they call you.

John: Exactly. If someone calls the dispatcher and says, "I want this particular cab," they send you. So if you have lots of special requests you are busy all the time and there are other people that aren't quite as outgoing and friendly and might sit around and have to wait for the anonymous call.

Michael: So if it's just a generic call, they'll put you in a cue and go from one to the other?

John: Right. So even as I was doing my specials, I would be moving up on the generic cue and when I was finally done with my friends, I'd get a call for another ride. So it was good for business and I was the kind of person where if I dropped somebody off at the edge of town and driving back into town empty and I saw someone standing there waiting for the bus, I'd pull over and give them a free ride into town and introduce myself. I would give them my card; let them know that I would love their business. After all, I'm driving empty to town so I might as well promote myself.

Michael: Right after Halloween did you leave the lights in the car or did you take it out? Did the cab ever look like a normal Yellow Cab?

John: Well, I did take out the aluminum foil and the fog effects, but I did start to look for little gadgets that maybe had little flashing colored lights. I had a couple of little toys that I glued onto the dashboard that kind of looked Star Treky and chasing red, red, green, blue lighting. Just little, tiny stuff just to be kind of funny and some little, minor sound effects.

Michael: So for how long was it just a little bit of it?

John: You know when I bought this car from Fred it had an unbelievable sound system in it at the time. So I could really rock people out on their ride and working the night shift people were either going to or from work or to or from a party and having the ability to make the cab a really memorable part of their evening.

One day I went into the music store and there was a little \$150 keyboard. I didn't know how to play the keyboard; I was a classical oboe player in high school and grammar school. So there was this little keyboard that Casio made that I asked the owner of the music store if I could bring it out into my car and mess around with it a little bit.

So when I brought it out to the car it ran on a couple of batteries and I found that if I plugged a audio cord from the output of the keyboard into

the back of my equalizer that ran my sound system I was able to basically layer the keyboard into the sound system. So at that time it was a cassette player, but I could play along with the cassette player. I could put on the Beatles and keep playing the song over and over again until I kind of figured it out.

I didn't do this because I wanted to necessarily amaze people in my car, I just wanted to have some interesting things to do in the car when I was sitting at midnight waiting for the next phone call to ring and entertain myself. To try and make the job not boring; some guys read magazines, some guys pitch quarters and I wanted to mess around with these little, portable electronics. At the time, just like the laptop computers became faster and better and cooler every six months in the mid-90s, in the mid-80s that same improvement in computer processing allowed the audio keyboards to go from the first one sounded pretty much like a toy and the second one sounded like a grand piano. Six months later they came out with one that had all the instruments of the orchestra and the next one was touch sensitive with pedals just like a grand piano.

It kind of became fun for me to try and keep the car in the leading edge of technology. My wife bought me a keyboard for Christmas, and I ended up gluing the two together, the little tiny Casio with this bigger keyboard and it messed up the sound system completely; I couldn't really figure it out because I really wasn't an expert in audio and mixing sound. So I went back to the music store and I said, "This one keyboard sounds great when I play it by itself and the other one when I try and wire them in together, everything sounds really muddy and soft."

He said, "You've messed up the achievement of the system. You need a mixing board." I said, "What is a mixing board?" They said, "A mixing board has multiple inputs and the stereo out that you can go to your sound system and everything will sound clean." So I bought a mixing board at Radio Shack with a little 9 volt battery and it worked perfectly and that solved my audio problems.

Now I had the pipe organ and the sampler where I could say, "We're having some fun now," and then play it in every different octave, "We're having some fun, fun, fun," because I'm kind of an entertaining guy. I just kind of messed around and tried to make people laugh. I figured it was more fun making people laugh and take them to their location than just sitting quietly and not talking to them or interacting.

So, I had the two keyboards and I went back to the music store and said, "Well, I have these two empty holes in the mixing board. What else can I put in here?" And they said, "Why don't you put a microphone in." So I bought a microphone. It sounded like AM talk radio, it was very dry. So I

went back to the music store and I said, "How do I make it sound like a big concert hall?" And they said, "Well, you reverb and delay." I said, "What's that?" They said there were multi-effect processors that mess around with the sound that gives it that big stadium kind of arena echo. So I bought a little pedal that I guess is normally used for a guitar that makes the guitar sound richer, but I fed my microphone through that pedal, which was also another 9 volt battery.

So I was starting to have a lot of 9 volt batteries and AA batteries running the show. But it wasn't really like I was saying that I'm doing this because I want to make more money. I was doing this because I wanted to make the job more fun than not being at work!

Michael: So when were you adding all this equipment?

John: In the mid-80s, '84, '85, '86.

Michael: You were doing it slowly?

John: Right. I hadn't gotten into the stage lighting aspect yet. It was pretty much just a sack of keyboards. I would go to New York to visit my parents and I'd go to the big music store and I'd look around and say, "What do you have that is small and interesting and runs on 12 volt power?" A lot of these things that have little wall plugs do run on 12 volts.

I was trying to make the job fun for me. My attitude is: Life is too short to not have fun with the job that you do. If you are going to sit in a cab for 12 hours a day, you have to make it so that you enjoy it otherwise it's going to rub off on your patrons and you're not really enjoying where you are.

Michael: So what kind of feedback were you getting in the earlier days? Were you getting positive feedback, did you get some negative feedback?

John: I was the busiest and most popular taxi driver in town. I think the only person that didn't like the fact that I was entertaining while driving was an old lady that was a teacher at the elementary school. She was about 85 and she said, "When I want entertainment I'll go see entertainment. I don't want it with my taxi ride."

She was the only one that really gave me a thumbs down. So I thought that 99.99% of people I put a big smile on their face. I must be headed in the right direction, if you pardon the driving pun.

Michael: At that time, when you bought the cab, how did it work? Did you have to charge a certain rate like all other 50 cabs? Was that regulated?

John: There were meters in the taxis. But the cab company didn't get a percentage of the meter. The cab company charged a weekly fee based on how busy they felt that week was. Obviously Christmas week it might be \$100 a day and in slow season it might be \$30 a day.

Michael: I see, so it could vary.

John: Right. So because of that the meter was really a tool that I was able to use to let everyone that rode in my cab know that they were going to get a little better deal than anybody else. If you got in the cab and the person didn't know you they start the meter the second you sat down and they turn it off when they got to your destination.

For me, you know I wouldn't hit the meter on until I'd gone three or four blocks and maybe if they'd say, "Can you stop at the grocery store. I need to pick up a quart of milk," I would say, "The meter is off. Take your time." I was very lenient and I wanted people to feel like they knew how much it cost to go from town to their house, but if every other cab driver charged them \$7.50 and they gave him a \$10, and I charged \$5.00 and they still gave me a \$10.

Michael: See you knew what you were doing, though. You were giving them something for free. You were kind of grooming them for more business down the road, would you agree?

John: I was trying to make them feel that when they called and asked for me, they were getting someone that knew where they lived, that took care of them.

Michael: You were building your business. You wanted to give them reasons to call you. And if the reason why is that John doesn't start my meter for three or four blocks and he saves money, I'm going to call him next time.

John: And because most of the people in the service industry they tipped well, and it made them feel better to leave a bigger tip. They knew they were probably going to pay me about the same as the next guy, but when they rode with me they felt a little better getting out of the car because they felt like they were really taking care of me. The difference between the meter and what they paid was bigger so they left a bigger tip. It didn't matter to me. The money I made in one night was all one big lump and I'd have to pay my gas and my shift fee out of that regardless. So I wasn't cheating the company or anything.

Michael: Did you ever have like self doubt? Did you ever say to yourself, "This is a stupid idea?" Anything negative at almost quashed your idea?

John: See, that is a good question. Because I was just trying to make myself happy, and I was just trying to go to work and look forward to going to work and seeing who I was going to meet and having fun with knowing people's names, remembering their names was also very important.

There might have been a little animosity from the other cab drivers that didn't quite have the outgoing personality that I had. As far as, "John is a whacko."

Michael: [Laughter] Yeah.

John: But I don't think that caused me any self-doubt. Then as I became more experienced in the taxi company, what happens is the taxi company would turn the telephones into the taxi system at night and whoever was the late night shift boss would answer the actual telephone calls right in the taxi on their radio. Your radio would go ring, ring, ring, and you'd pick up the phone and say, "High Mountain Taxi, this is John. Can I help you?" And someone would say, "John, I need a cab in front of the Wheeler Opera House." And I'd say, "Kenny, how close are you?" And Kenny would chime in and say, "I'll be there in two minutes." Then I'd say, "You'll see Kenny in two minutes. Thanks a lot."

So I ran a pretty good shift, too, because I was good at being clear with the customers as to exactly how far away the cab was because they talked to the driver that was number one on the list. The other beauty of being the late night shift boss was the fact that after 1:00 in the morning, if you were shift boss if you were available you got the run and everybody else, because they had pretty much finished their shift, they could hang out in case it was busy at night to see if they could stay busy.

But if you weren't busy you got the next run. So therefore, I was pretty much able to interact with everybody that worked at night because I was the one that answered the phone when all the bartenders called and then late at night at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, I was the guy that picked up those bartenders and took them home. So I got a personal rapport in this small town. You know, in New York City you're not going to know everybody that calls the cab company. But in a town where there are only 10 or 12 night spots and you end up driving home the five or six bartenders that take cabs home at night because after their shift is over and they are cleaning up the bar, they open up the beer for themselves and they don't want to drive after drinking. That is when they relax and have their friends in the bar after closing and clean up.

Michael: When someone's at the bar and their bartending and they need a cab, they are going to call you.

John: Exactly, because they remember me as the guy that took them home. Sometimes I'd say, "This ride's on me." It couldn't hurt to be remembered and friendly in a small town. I think that's a no-brainer.

Michael: When did you start taking the taxi to another level with all the stuff on the roof and the disco lights and the disco ball? How much longer did that take before you got that going and then why did you start taking it to a new level?

John: One evening a friend of mine got into the car who is kind of more of an electronics expert than I was. I had a very musical ride and I had some little silly lights. I think I had a little ping pong ball sized mirror ball with an itty, bitty book light on it.

He got in and said, "John, you know the sound system is great and whole audio thing that you're doing and the sound effects. But you need better lighting." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "Well, you need chase lights. Lights that follow each other around in a tube and you need car cams, you know the stage lights." They make mini ones that you see hanging up above the stage at concerts and they make little tiny ones that run on the same kind of low voltage lights that you might see in your bathroom or kitchen or in a restaurant.

So he showed me this catalog and I said, "Look, I've got a few hundred bucks I'd like to put towards this project. Why don't you tell me what I should buy out of this book and let's turn the cab into a more amazing experience." And in a taxi in a ski town that's also very popular with summer music festival, their kind of down season; October, November is slow as well as May and June after the lifts close.

One of those off seasons we took a couple of weeks and we rewired the cab with better lights on the floor that flashed and lights that ran around. I think at the same time I went home to visit my family in New York City and I went into this funny shop in Greenwich Village and had what looked like these Star Trek glasses, wrap around plastic glasses. When you looked through them they made all the white lights a rainbow. They were basically spectrum analyzers; they were prismatic.

Michael: I went to that Web site. Those are cool.

John: Instead of buying just one pair, I bought 15 pairs. I figured that when people get into my car, they want the ultimate experience, I'll hand out the trippy glasses and they'll have their virtual, psychedelic rock concert ride.

So we had the lighting and we also built a fog machine out of a thermos, the one we used for camping and a little plastic t-valve that you could buy

at a plumbing supply store and some heater duct hosing that I could run underneath the seat. I was able to build without any electrical parts simply a thermos of hot water I could dump dry ice into and then cap the top and the force of the fog pouring off the dry ice would just push it through the tube under my seat and dump it on the floor.

So now I had an efficient fog machine with colored lights, blue and yellow and red lights flashing on the floor and a couple of stage lights on my keyboard and a bigger mirror ball that now had a motor on it and I think the Ultimate Taxi was born. That was around 1989.

Michael: For more exclusive interviews on business, marketing, advertising and copywriting, go to Michael Senoff's HardToFindSeminars.com.

So when did you get your first media attention and how did that come about?

John: I was just going to say that around 1989 I went to the cab company and I said, "Listen, I don't want to be charged the same as everybody." Everybody else needs to go to the airport and the dispatcher. And at that time also there were now cell phones. Back in the early 80s there weren't cell phones in the Valley.

I said, "Look, I've got my own phone number, I'm getting my own phone calls that are keeping me busy. I don't want to pay \$500 a week for dispatching and the ability to work the airport when I don't want to work the airport or dispatching. I want to be my own businessman. Cut me a new deal."

Michael: And what did they say?

John: As much as he liked me personally he said, "You know, John, we really don't want to start playing favorites and then everybody is going to want a special deal. So if you really want to do it yourself, my advice is quit the taxi company and go off on your own and get your own limo license or whatever."

Michael: You could do that if you chose to?

John: I told him that if I didn't work for the cab company I would simply do the exact same thing I was doing, but I would be selling fun as opposed to transportation. From a semantics point of view, you could pay for the show in the car and if I had no meter in the car I could say, "Well, the ride is free but the show costs \$20."

At that time the taxi was white with blue decals on it. So we parted ways and as soon as we parted ways I had the car painted yellow and bought the checkers, so it looked like a classic, old taxi cab from New York, figuring that if people saw me driving around they'd flag me down thinking I was a cab and I could say, "Listen, I'm not a standard cab. If you really need a cab to the airport or up to Snow Mass I'll call the cab company on my phone and get you a regular cab. But if you want to have a great time with your friends after dinner, this is the ticket."

Michael: You didn't have any problems with the police that you were impersonating a cab driver or anything like that? Was that a little bit of a concern?

John: It is funny, I always say that in order to do a job like mine you have to be on a first name basis with all the police in town and have a [inaudible] that's actually never taken a ride with you.

But because of the fact that I liked to give free rides when I wasn't busy because it was good for business and in the off season I'd see the police taking a walk around town. I'd say, "Hey, Jim and Terry, come on in and see what I got new in the car this week." So I was friendly with all the taxis and I was the guy at night who the police would call when had some belligerent guy on the street that they were just about ready to arrest for disorderly conduct and the cab would come by and we'd say, "We know where you live. Let me take him home and get him off the street." That would solve a huge problem for them.

I was the guy that helped them when they didn't want to arrest someone but they wanted to get them home safely at night.

Michael: So you went out on your own, you converted it to look like an older yellow cab from New York.

John: And I considered myself almost a dispatcher for the taxi company that was parked in the middle of town because I didn't want the standard taxi rides. I didn't want to steal money from the guys who were trying to make a living doing rides from A to B. I had kind of skewed off into more of a 20 minute amusement park ride competing with the horse carriage ride that takes people on a little ride around the center of town.

I also realized that Aspen was a really fun place for adults, but there was really not very much family entertainment. There were no malls and there were no arcades. So if you took your kids out to dinner in the evening, there was really nothing to do with them after dark. So I figured I would be the E ticket ride to Disney Land.



Therefore, you're not competing with the cabs because even though your show is in a cab, you're selling fun and memories and Polaroid pictures of everybody in the car. So I started taking Polaroid's of every group ride and they would get their Polaroid and if I had some famous people in the car, maybe I'd take an extra Polaroid or two for my files.

Michael: How many years from the time you got the cab to where you made this transition to selling fun?

John: I think I worked for the taxi company for about 4 ½ years before I quit the cab company and kind of skewed off into a musical, theater, night club, amusement park ride.

Michael: For those four years you were always charging standard per mile rate?

John: Correct. Well, I just wasn't running the meter at all because I had regular customers in the car and they always took care of me.

Michael: But you weren't selling anything else? You were earning income on your tips and your meter rate?

John: Right. Then when I skewed off I decided I would charge \$20 for 20 minutes. How much to ride in the car, \$20 and I'll take you and your friends on a little ride around town. And I think at that time I also printed up some Ultimate Taxi T-shirts to sell out of the trunk. The trunk became a little boutique where you could buy the rainbow glasses to take with you.

I also at that time began buying the chemical light sticks that you see people wearing at concerts around their neck.

Michael: What kind of money did you make driving the cab around Aspen?

John: The fact is, business was really good and you could gross to \$250 or \$350 or \$400 a night. So if you worked six days a week and you brought home \$400 a night, that's \$2,400 minus your gas, expenses, and tires.

Michael: And you had to pay the dispatcher?

John: You had to pay the taxi company and that might be \$500 a week and gas might be \$500 a week. So if you worked six days a week and persevered it was pretty good money.

Now, if you only 4 ½ days a week, it wasn't such a good job anymore because it took you two days to pay for all of your expenses.

Michael: So you went over to the entertainment side of things and you started out at \$20 for 20 minutes, right?

John: Right.

Michael: And what are you charging today?

John: Today I do a ride that's about 45 minutes and I charge \$150 for the group. If you figure I can put five or six people in the car, it's closer to \$20 a person.

Michael: Yeah, that's a pretty good value.

John: But of course, you know, the fancy hotels have gone from \$199 a night to \$999 a night for the St. Regis and the Ritz Carleton clubs and things like that. My clients kind of all skewed off from driving around a bunch of people out partying and bartenders to families and groups of people out.

I kind of lost some of my local business because they really wanted to get somewhere and I was more of a horse carriage ride around the mall.

Michael: Right, I got you. How do you set up your business structure and were you operating as a sole proprietor or did you incorporate the business. Any kind of formality when you went to the entertainment type side of things?

John: No, I didn't. I didn't try to patent or copyright what I did because I figured that look, if people see what I do and it gives them the idea to try something like that where they live, good luck to them.

I don't have a lock and key on making your job fun and surely people will maybe come up with things that interest them to structure their business around, but I wasn't thinking in terms of, "Oh, this is something that I'm going to franchise and take worldwide."

My thoughts at the time were, well, this is maybe a template for a real amusement park ride at Disney Land where maybe the cars could be on a conveyer belt and there could be an anamatron at the top and they could be pulled through different visual experiences and look like they were making the jump from light speed from *Star Wars*.

I wanted to make the ride interesting as well as colorful. I used to have a little telescope that was under my seat and on some of the rides where we get out of the city lights I would pull over and show people the moons of Jupiter. Up at 8,000 feet, the air is very clear at night and you can see a zillion stars. I had a little star chart that I could put out on my car at night and we could figure out what we were looking at. I could explain to people

that the moons of Jupiter each night there would be three on one side of Jupiter and one on the other and two nights later they'd all be on the other side of Jupiter. It pretty much proved that we weren't at the center of the Universe because something was going around Jupiter.

Michael: That is a great idea. Let me ask you this: Did anyone every knock you off in Aspen?

John: Nobody really did.

Michael: Never saw any other taxi that was similar to yours that kind of took your idea away or anything like that? Or anyone around the country that you know of who has taken the idea to a new level or maybe not as good as you, but tried to do it in their own area?

John: Well, for starters, I did notice that there were some luxury stretch limos. There was someone who took a Jeep Wagoneer and stretched it and put cool lights in it and stuff like that. There was also Suburbans that had been stretched. I did start to see some luxury limos that were not only really interesting and unusual cars, but also they had a little TV with a fireplace on it and a bar. They tried to make their ride kind of special.

But there is something kind of intimidating about if you see a stretch limousine sitting on the street, you figure that either there is somebody in it because the windows are dark or somebody has hired it. You don't just think of it as being available.

With a taxi light on it lit up, it is a much more approachable vehicle.

Michael: That's right. Because what you do, you approach a taxi and you get in.

John: People say, "Why don't you put this into a big limo or a bus?" You know, I'm kind of happy with the way it is right now, because everybody knows that old yellow taxi cab look. They are still using it in commercials today even though the last Checkered cab stopped rolling off the assembly line in 1981.

Michael: It tells you exactly what you are going to do. You see Taxi, you get in and you go for a ride.

John: Exactly.

Michael: All right, tell me about how you got your very first media attention?

John: The local newspaper did a story about me March 23, 1989. I was the section header of the weekend newspaper.

Michael: Did they call you out of the blue or did you have a contact? Did you know someone; did you make any efforts to get in there?

John: Well, after four years of driving around in circles in a crazy car, pretty much everyone in town knew me. I was approached by one of the writers that said, "Hey, John. I want to do a story about your car." Then later that summer I think a free lance videographer who worked for WTBS, Turner Broadcasting was approached by a show called, *Good News*, that featured interesting stories that were fun and made people smile.

He filmed me for this show on TBS, which actually, back then the Superstation was seen in like 60 countries. One thing about getting on television and getting in the newspapers and magazines was that other people were interested in doing interesting stories would kind of find me.

In other words, the press didn't really get me that much more business, but it got me a lot more publicity.

Michael: Yeah, let's talk about that. I want to go back to the first story. The one locally said, "Hey, John, I want to do a story on your car." You weren't in the publicity realm of things yet, because it was just starting, right?

John: That's correct.

Michael: All right. So the newspaper did the story. Did they interview you in person or over the phone or what?

John: No, he spent an hour or so with me in car and took a few pictures. The story ran in the Aspen paper, which was distributed all up and down the Valley.

Michael: So when people read about it and it said, "If you want to go for a ride," what did it say, "Contact John Barns at the Ultimate Taxi?" What was the name of your company? If someone wanted to look you up in the phone book at that time.

John: It was called, The Ultimate Taxi.

Michael: Okay, the Ultimate Taxi. Okay.

John: One of my quotes he put on the article in big print was, "Ten times a night people tell me I should be on David Letterman." Another quote of mine was, "It's got to be the only ride like it in the world. People get in the car and are transformed. They get out with a big smile on their faces, they're happy."

Michael: You remember the day this story ran?

John: I do remember the day the story ran. It was March 23, 1989. I think I had gone skiing the day before and I had sprained my thumb and it was really hurting. I was like, "I'm in such pain, but this story is so great!"

Michael: Did you notice any type of measurable increase in business or phone calls or anything from that?

John: I definitely had people whether I was in the grocery store or walking down the street or sitting in the middle of town in the car. But one of the ways I got business after I quit the taxi company and no longer had a dispatching service, is I'd park at the busiest part of town and I'd put on a show just sitting on the street there. Kind of prey on the intellectually curious. People would come over to see what was going on and I'd pitch myself. I'd say, "Listen, if you're not having fun in the car, I don't want your money. It's guaranteed that it's going to be most unbelievable 30 minutes you've ever spent or else there's no charge for the ride."

Obviously, in the busy seasons when there were tourists in town, I would attract people that had never seen me before.

Michael: So you were generating business like that. So the first story got you a little more well known around town. But it wasn't like the phone really started ringing off the hook with the local story.

John: It's true because it ran at the end of March, which is kind of the end of the sky season and within a couple of weeks the lifts were closed and business was quiet and it wasn't like I could measurable see. I always expected not very much business in slow seasons anyway because I was trying to create myself as a tourist attraction and when the tourists weren't around I didn't expect to have much business.

But certainly people would come up to me in the streets and tell me that was a great story.

Michael: How about TBS? Tell me about that. Was that your first big story?

John: That was the first camera man that filmed me and put me on national television.

Michael: Tell me about that whole experience and what you learned from it.

John: It was hard to think back because since then I lost track at about 280 camera crews that have filmed my story. I had days where I had CBS

News at 7:00, German Television at 8:00 and ESPN at 9:30 filming me. TV crews were fighting over the opportunity to do a story about me or add me to a story that they were doing about Aspen.

Michael: But one good story leads to another.

John: Yeah, I learned that media creates more media. Why not try to take this new found opportunity of free publicity and, you know, I never paid for an ad. I never bought an ad in the paper that said, "Call the Ultimate Taxi."

I realized that I had a tool that was like a media magnet. What I learned was that it could only be good, just like I didn't really measurable keep good enough records to say, "Oh, this month I made 12% more because I was on a television show." But I definitely felt like there was a positive aspect to it. And it was fun!

The whole idea of the cab was so I could learn how to play keyboards in between taxi rides and then it turned into me being a miniature Las Vegas show and then learning about stage lighting and lighting design and sound mixing and electronics and when the computers came around, I started learning about computers and then the Internet. So it was a learning experience and having TV crews in the car I started learning about how a television show was put together. How do they film a four minute segment for a TV show or a news story?

I do think that the story in the newspaper also got the Denver television stations interested in my story because they also read the wire services and get the papers from Aspen.

Michael: So the first big story and then more media kept coming at you. Did you ever think to yourself, "God, I've got all this free publicity and this is great for my business but is there any other way I can monetize it?"

John: What else can I sell beside the actual ride while I have to be sitting in the cab?

Michael: Right.

John: Well, in '96 when I put the Internet into the taxi and I had the world's first Internet connected taxi cab, my thoughts then were, "Well, I've got this toy store, but people can only stick their head in the toy store and buy my retail when I'm actually parked in between rides." If there was a way where people could reach in the trunk and buy things from my trunk when I was asleep because they could buy it on my virtual Web site, which kind of showed off the fun and the character of the taxi and also had a shopping area with a shopping cart where you could buy some glasses,

some colored toys, and some gifts for parties or Bar Mitzvahs or whatever. That was originally my thought when I put the Internet in the car was that it might be a way where I could expand the amount of hours a day that the cab was in business.

And I did sell fun packs of toys from the virtual gift shop and the publicity ended up giving me traffic to my Web site because I wanted to make sure on every television show I did I had the Web site connected to the taxi. I certainly made sure that I talked about the fact that besides having digital cameras and lasers and fog machines, now we have the Internet and you can check out the Ultimate Taxi online.

So I found that I was getting, what you were saying, like a 1,000 people a day to my Web site without spending any money on advertising. It did appear in retail sales and trying to be Wal-Mart of the Web I had to compete with Wal-Mart.

Michael: Yeah, so people really weren't buying stuff online?

John: Not enough to make it worth the time it took me as the guy that would fill the orders and run to Post Office and ship them out and check the email and get the orders.

Michael: But you were thinking how can I monetize it. I've got this media attention and it's very valuable. I can send them to my Web site and that was initially the idea to see if you could sell something to the visitors of the Web site?

John: I also found another way to get media beyond just people who had just found out about me. When there was other interesting stories, you know, over Christmas the news crews would come up to do a story about who the celebrities are that are in Aspen this week, whether it was *Inside Edition* or *20/20*. You know what I mean? So when I'd see a camera crew on the street or I'd see a satellite truck, yeah, I'd pull up behind them and knock on the door and say, "Listen, this guy, and this guy and this guy all did stories about me. Why don't you take a look at what I've got back there? If you like I'll make some time available for you. And if not, no harm no foul."

Michael: What would happen generally?

John: I'd always get filmed and I'd never make it on the cutting room floor.

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John: In other words, everybody would want to film me and everybody would use the footage that they got because it was a very colorful story that was kind of unique and fun. There was enough bad news in the world and it was the kind of story where they could come to town for one story and in an hour and a half they could get another story in the can. When they went back to where ever they were from, it wasn't the type of story that wasn't breaking news that they had to use right away. They could wait for the weekend or a slow news day and it was something to use to sign off on the weekend news.

I found myself being kind of a media slut.

Michael: What did you learn about the media? Because a lot of visitors to my site we have interviews with publicity experts. From being on the other end, and being the guy interviewed in your taxi, what have you learned about the media that maybe surprised you? How would you advise say someone interested in getting free publicity with a product or an idea or a concept? What advice could you give them when it comes to the media?

John: First of all, you have everything to gain and nothing loose by pitching them your story. You may not get everybody interested but it can't hurt to knock on a few doors or send a few queries out there and say, "Look, this is what I'm doing and it's different. Next time you are in the area, put me on the list."

And make yourself available for free. It got to a point where I would say to the media, "Listen, the media is now my best customer. I'm doing eight interviews a month and I'm going broke because I'm devoting so much of my time to blocking off hours of my evenings for TV shoots that I'm not able to pay the bills anymore. If you'd like to have the Ultimate Taxi alive and well, I don't want to make rock star wages, but I would like to make just as much as I would make if I were driving Mrs. Smith and her family around for a couple of hours."

Michael: So as demand got higher with the media, instead of giving it away for free and doing the show, you charged them like a regular rate.

John: Yes, and I'd say, "You're hire a car to follow me around for tracking shots on the street. Just think of me as renting another car. Basically, I'm not charging for my time, I'm charging a location fee because you want to have somebody who talks on the screen like a cartoon, and I'm going to be spending all day waxing the car and cleaning it up and coming up with some new clever things that no one has seen before. I've got consumables and I'm using glow sticks and dry ice. It costs me some gas to put the show on the road."



Michael: Was it a problem? Was there any resistance?

John: No, there wasn't. Well, I found with the hard news they would say, "Well, we don't do that." So if CNN wanted to shoot you for *Headline News*, you—

Michael: You couldn't charge.

John: Exactly. But if *Regis & Kathy Lee* wanted you to spend the evening driving Regis around as he did a segment about all the different night lights in Aspen, you could say to those guys, "Everybody in the crew is getting paid, except for me. The sound guy, the camera guy but I'm the guy that spends all this time and I'm kind of a production assistant here." So I could get \$300 or \$400 or whatever. Something to make the night worthwhile, because my wife, as much as she thought it was cool I was on TV, she would want me to help pay the bills at the end of the month. Just having another video tape on the wall from another TV show just didn't cut it.

Michael: I understand. Are you married with kids?

John: Yes.

Michael: How many kids have you got?

John: I have three. I have a 21 year old who is a senior in college in California who, when she was three or four years old she helped me glue the black light stars onto the roof of the car. Now I have a nine year old and an eleven year old, as well.

Michael: So tell me about your show. When did you start incorporating the show and the music and developing your product?

John: I found that the closest big city to Aspen, besides Denver, which was about 200 miles, is Las Vegas, which is about 600 miles. I was really pumped up on lights, lighting effects and colors and Las Vegas to me was like a candy store. It was like capitalism run wild with lighting designers.

And of course if I went to Las Vegas and went to a show, I could write off the trip as market research for my cab. Knock on the door of the lighting guy's booth and ask him a few questions and give him my card and ask him about combination lighting. I used to say when everybody was watching the dancing girls on stage; I'd be looking over my shoulders at what colored lights were being bled onto the stage for the effects they were getting.

It was like, oh, purple fog looks beautiful with green and yellow lights from over here and, you know what I'm saying?

Michael: Yeah. How many times did you do that?

John: It was kind of like an off season trip to Las Vegas. I went on a regular basis. I wasn't a big gambler, maybe \$100 or \$200 in the casino. I wasn't trying to break the bank. I realized that the huge casinos weren't being built on the backs of the winners.

Michael: So you went to really kind of research and look for ideas that would make the riding experience better for your customers.

John: Right. I'd go to Las Vegas and I'd see green laser light shows and I'd say, "Oh my God, that's incredible. I wonder if there's a miniature one that I could use in my car." I want to make sure that nobody comes close; I want to have a virtual Pink Floyd concert in my car. I want people to look down and you're knee deep in purple fog and there's a laser light show going on over their head. I also incorporated magic into the ride where I'd a series of magic tricks.

Michael: That's interesting. Can you take me on a little virtual ride? Little step by step. Let's say I call you up and I say, "John, I want to take an Ultimate Taxi ride myself and my family. Can you come pick me up?" What is the first thing that is going to happen?

John: People would step into the car with the reverb and the big arena sound and I'd say, "Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Ultimate Taxi. The world's only recording studio, theater, night club, planetarium, toy store taxi cab!" And then I'd have a sound effect of thousands of people cheering and stuff. I'd say, "Thank you, thank you. Hold your applause, please!"

Then the car pulls off from the curb and the music would start.

Michael: They're going for a ride and it's up to you where you're taking them, right?

John: It's pretty much a ride where the destination doesn't matter. It's getting there.

Michael: What about the money? Is the money paid after or before?

John: At the end of the ride. So I could sell stuff out of the trunk.

Michael: Keep going.

John: So people get in the car and I would bring up the levels of the music so they would be surrounded by a great classic rock song. Then all of a sudden they would see a laser beam dancing to the music on the roof of the car and little screen that is on the center of roof. They'd all be pointing and look at that! Look at that!

Then I'd reach over my shoulder while I was driving slowly down the street and I would do this magic illusion which looks like I've taken the light off the ceiling and I'm now holding a red light in my hand and then I'd throw it back on the ceiling and pull it off and stick it in my ear and pull it out of my mouth and throw it back on ceiling and everyone would start laughing.

Then all of a sudden lights would come on in the floor and they'd realize that they were knee deep in purple and red fog and they all go, "Oh, my God, I can't even see my feet!"

Michael: How do you activate the smoke machine?

John: Well, before they get in the car, I would break up some dry ice and have it in a plastic cup that was sitting on top of the thermos ready to go. Once I started the fog I really couldn't stop it, but I knew how much to put in so that it wouldn't fill up the car neck high because we still want to breathe oxygen in the car.

There are enough cracks and leaks on the floorboards by the doors that it would all kind of leak out pretty quickly anyway.

Michael: So you had to get dry ice every night?

John: Every night before work I'd have to stand in line at the grocery store and buy dry ice because you can't save the stuff, it just evaporates.

Michael: Would it last you all night?

John: I would buy enough to do three or four or five shows and if I had a really busy night the night before work I'd heat up water on the stove and bring hot water out to the car, because the hotter the water the less fog I needed to create. So the first show would be hot water with a little bit of dry ice and then next show would be a little bit more dry ice because the water had cooled off from the 100 below zero ice.

If I had a really busy night I could stop by the gas station and they had a tank in the back and they knew me at the gas station and I could run in with my thermos and dump out the cold water and put in some hot tap water and that would get the show back up to snuff.

Then all of a sudden white lights would start dancing around in circles in the car and stage lights would start flashing on the equipment. I had the company that made the haze machine. Besides the fog, which was a low cloud effect on the floor, I also found when I went to Las Vegas that the lighting looked cool when you had some sort of mist in the air that allowed the lights to be like conic projections of color.

So I had the company that made the big special effects for the Siegfried and Roy show at the Mirage design me, and I paid a fortune for it back then, I think I paid \$2,000. They were interested in seeing how small they could make one anyway, so they made me a mini-haze machine that basically molecularized pharmaceutical grade mineral oil. It didn't burn anything, because I didn't want smoke in the air because those smoke machines smell bad.

I wanted something where if there were no lights on I could still see out the dashboard and drive.

Michael: So it was molecularized baby oil?

John: Basically and it was such a little amount that I only had to fill up the machine like every four months. But it put a little bit of like a haze in the air that you couldn't smell or taste and it was harmless, but it made the light show look like a big arena rock concert. At the front page of my Web site where you can see all the colors shooting out of the lights, it made the laser not just appear where it hit the wall but you could see the laser shooting through the air. I had like a 3-D laser light show and fog effects and this little magic trick that I would do where I basically had a little, and I don't mind telling you how I do this, because its one of the things that is the best seller in the Ultimate Taxi gift shop.

I do this trick that actually amazes people and then later in the ride I teach them how to do it and I pass the trick around with all the kids and I teach them a magic trick and at the end of the ride I say, "Oh, you up for a sale from the Ultimate Taxi souvenir shop?"

Michael: Tell me. What is it?

John; Basically, its that little plastic cover on your thumb that has a pressure sensitive switch and a little red LED light and a battery. You put that over your thumb and when you pinch it with your index finger this red light appears in your hand and when you open your fingers the light goes out. You can reach by your ear and pinch and it looks like you just pulled a red light out of your ear.

I could reach up to the ceiling and I designed some switches on the floor so that I could step on an old fashioned, high-low beam switch on the floor and the power supply to my laser went through that switch so I could step on the button and at the same time pinch my hand and it would look like I just grabbed this laser pattern from the ceiling that was the same color red and I'd pinch my finger and ear at the same time and it looked like I just took the light off the ceiling and waving it around the car. If I pretended to throw it back on the ceiling and step on the button, it looked like I was playing catch with a laser beam. I'd buy them by the dozen from the company that stocked the magic stores in Las Vegas.

I'd say, "Look, I'm not the biggest magic store because my store is only 4 feet by 2 feet."

Michael: How about the drums and what musical instrument are you playing in there?

John: Well, I have an electronic keyboard and I have a digital drum set and I also have an electronic wind instrument because I was an oboe player. Basically, the electronic wind instrument has a synthesizer that you can key up any instrument. It can be the French horn, or the tuba or the pipe organ or saxophone with reverb and delay. It also has the ability to transpose it to any key so it was easy for me to learn a song on the wood wind because I could just figure out what key the piece was in.

Say the key was in B flat, I could just say, C equals B flat and I could just play in C because after all I'm driving and I don't want to think too hard about the playing.

So I'm driving around and the music is playing and all of a sudden I'm playing drums along with the music and driving slowly down the street with my left arm on the wheel watching what is going on in front of me, but I know where everything is in the car because it's kind of like I evolved with it.

So I play a little drums and I play a little keyboard and I'm mixing myself in with a CD or record that people have heard before. I kind of size people up when they get into the car if they are a little older I might play a little jazzier set. If they are younger I play more of a hard rock concert.

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Michael: Are they talking to you during the ride?

John: I mean it's like being at a rock concert. It's pretty loud in the car and I'm playing all of these instruments and driving and now I've passed out the rainbow glasses so all they see is colored lights everywhere. As that song fades out, you know, I go into a little interlude where I play the saxophone with a severed limb. It looks like I'm playing the saxophone as I raise it up and it looks like there is a dismembered hand playing one of the hands of the wind instrument.

Michael: Do you get big laughs on that one?

John: Big laughs on that and the hand crawls along the top of the front seat and after that I say, "Now, for something completely different!" And at the same time I've kind of worked myself to a part of town where there is a dead end street where there is kind of a long, very little traffic, and I cue up on laptop a virtual simulator of a roller coaster ride. So all of a sudden they look at the screen at the front of the car and it's dark out because I only do this one at night, so you can't really see out the front window, they can just see the laptop screen and it looks like you are sitting in the front seat of a roller coaster. You can just see the tracks and then all of a sudden the thing goes whoosh and at the same time I give it a little gas and we take off. Every roller coaster ride start to clack, clack, clack up the hill I will kind of slow down and speed up and I keep goosing the gas so that it feels like they are getting pushed back in their seat a little bit.

Michael: Yeah, oh that is great.

John: As we're climbing to the top, and then when we get to the top, I step on the gas and then the brake. So as we're going up and over the top of the loops they feel like they're actually on a roller coaster ride.

So I do a roller coaster ride, usually I do two; one down this dead end street and then I say, "Did you like that?" And everyone goes, "Yeah!" So I say, "You want to do a crazier one?" And they go, "Yeah!" So I cue up one with more loop to loops and barrel rolls and stuff and as the track appears to barrel and you see the scenery go upside down and then back up again, if I just track the wheel a little to the left and right they lean left and right, you know, kind of like a simulator.

Michael: Yeah, yeah. That's right.

John: So then after the ride is over, I say, "Ladies and Gentlemen: As you can tell by now safety continues to be the number one priority here in the Ultimate Taxi because of course the first person I run into may very well be on the last ride and never permitted to do it out here. By keeping your safety in mind I do suggest that you have those safety glasses on for the beginning of the next song and of course this is strictly for your safety."

So then they put their rainbow glasses on and at this point I take, depending on how many. If there are five people in the car I take five of those 22 inch long glow sticks that haven't been snapped yet and I dip them in the hot water of the fog machine so that they warm up because the warmer they are the brighter the colors.

Michael: Where do you have the warm water? In the front?

John: Basically it is on the left to the left of my left leg between the door and I have to basically climb over the fog machine to get out and into the car because there is a thermos and they are kind of squishing me a little bit.

In fact, I'm squeezed into the front seat of like a fighter pilot. I've got synthesizers and mixing boards and lighting computers and fog machines and so I'm kind of squeezed in there.

Then they all have their glasses on and I start the next song and right as I start it I bend the five light sticks and bang them on the wheel. I like the ones that have five different colors in each one, they are multicolored ones. I wiggle them and make this incredibly bright light show of all these colors in the center of car, since they can't see what is going on because they have the glasses on. So for every one light stick I have in my hand they see nine. So if I have five it looks like I have 45 light sticks in my hand and I touch them with it in the back seat and they kind of, "Ah!"

Then I throw the light sticks into the back seat and they all take one and start doing their own light show. After that song is over I say, "You all are looking really colorful back there with all those light sticks. It is the photo session portion of the ride. Although I do a lot of things while driving, framing a good picture while driving is not one of them. So I'm going to pull over here."

I've got some lights I put in the car for lighting up television towns in the back seat, because if they put on their spotlight on the top of the camera, it wipes out all my colors. So I have these kind of gauzed white cans that I use to light up the back seat that gives the color balance so you can see all of the colors on the ceiling as well. The ceiling has black light effects and fiber optics and electro-luminescent wire that chases back and forth so it's just crazy. The whole ceiling kind of comes alive.

I leave the lights on the ceiling on and I take a series of photographs of them wiggling their light sticks with the glasses on and then a couple of portrait shots. As soon as I'm done taking the pictures I pop the memory card out of the camera and slip it into the laptop and bring up those photos

on the computer and we take a look at the pictures I just took, which people love to see themselves.

Michael: That's free with the ride?

John: Right. And then I slid those pictures onto a CD, I have a blank CD cued up into the disk cartridge of the laptop so I burn those pictures that I just took of them onto the CD that comes as part of the ride figuring I only need to make one so that they can email it to their friends or pass it around and copy them onto their different computers, or whatever.

And I say, "Well, I'm going to take the best couple of pictures that I take and put them on my Web site because I offer immortality with every taxi ride." I ask them what they'd like to call their group name on the Web because whatever they call it, the way I design page is you should be able to Google whatever you called your ride and in a couple of days you should be on page one of Google.

After I get the pictures on the CD I do a magic show where I do a card trick or ask them to name any card in the deck and think of it and then when they tell me what it is I open up the deck and the only card in the deck that has writing on it is the card. I say, "Before I left the house I took a green Sharpie magic marker and I wrote the word "taxi" on one card and it's the card they think of.

I do a trick where I make a bottle vanish. It's in a white paper bag and I back light it with a blue stage light so you can kind of see it silhouetted in the bag and then all of a sudden I collapse the bag and it's gone.

I also explain to them how I did that magic trick with the laser on the ceiling and I give everyone a chance to be a kid. The beauty of that magic trick is all you have to do is be able to pinch your finger and thumb together. Even if you are a little uncoordinated in the first minute or two, by minute three or four you're an expert at it.

So I teach them the magic trick and mention that I've got a gift shop in the trunk and I do four or five quick magic tricks.

Michael: So by that time are you almost back to where you picked them up?

John: Well, I'm kind of zig zagging around town and I'm just trying to stay off main street where there are traffic lights and real traffic. In the evenings in a small town if you work the residential neighborhoods, all I have to worry about is running into a parked car. Nobody is really looking out the windows anyway.



I make a couple of sweeps past the restaurants while everyone is waiving their light sticks because I figure if the car is really colorful I want someone who is looking out the window of the restaurant to say, "What the hell is that?" Then the waiter will say, "Oh, that's the Ultimate Taxi. It's really fun and everybody does it." Figuring that there is going a grazing of people who say, "Let's do that after dinner." And then my phone rings when I drop those people off and it's someone saying, "Hey, if you are available we'd like to go on a ride."

Michael: What is the maximum amount of shows that you can do in an evening?

John: Well, that's the problem with the job is that it's kind of self limiting because what's fun to do for a couple of hours becomes a real job because you have to keep winding yourself up and resetting all your tricks and doing it over, and over, and over again.

But right now, if I'm charging \$150 for a ride and half the people give you \$170 or \$190 or they might buy a couple of toys for the kids and they might give you \$220. So if you do three rides and you go home with \$600 cash and you have no employees and you don't have to pay any taxi company, you just have to pay for your own insurance and you keep your cab up, you could see how it's not a bad one man show type of job.

The guys who are musicians in clubs, they have to breakdown their equipment and it's a real job. They probably don't make a third of that.

Michael: So generally, it's \$150. What is the biggest tip you've ever gotten?

John: On New Year's Eve, Prince Bangar, the Prince of Saudi Arabia I charged him \$300 to spend an hour up at his house taking some of his house guests on a ride and he gave me \$1,000 in cash. That's a \$700 tip and a bottle of Dom Perignon.

Michael: Wow. What is the second best tip?

John: Oh, you know, you ask for \$150 and people give you \$300. Doesn't happen that often. Some people don't tip you at all. It's best just to charge what makes you happy and if they tip you, you say you appreciate it because you've got a lot of overhead between the cell phones and buying new technology and laptop computers and Internet connections and new technology for the car, not to mention tires and all those normal type of expenses associated with driving a vehicle.

Michael: So the end of the ride comes...

John: So then we do another song or two and I say, “Where would you like to end up.” I work my way over to that location and they tell me that they want to be dropped off at their hotel or going out to dinner, can you drop of us off in front of the Hickory House or whatever. That’s not problem as long as it’s in the general area of town and pretty much everything is. If people need to go 15 miles I say, “Listen, I’ve got another group in 12 minutes and there’s no way I can take you all the way there and back, but if you can afford \$150 to play around with your friends, you can afford \$15 or \$16 to have me call another cab.”

Michael: How do you close it up? How do you ask for the money?

John: At the end of the ride I go to the back of the car and I pop the trunk and it’s decked out with some interesting \$5 and \$10 nick knack toys for kids. It’s not a hard sell and in spite of people, like if it’s a short season, you know, I buy these things for \$11 and I sell them for \$15. I’m not looking to—but you know if I sell a bunch of stuff it can help me pay the gas.

Michael: You should be marking that stuff up. Do you sell t-shirts still?

John: I don’t sell t-shirts anymore. Just the folding them and putting them in plastic bags and keeping them clean. When I started skewing off these last couple of years into another business I kind of let the retail slip a little bit.

Michael: So you process their credit card right while you’re out...

John: I mention that besides being the highest tech taxi in the world it has the lowest tech Visa imprinter in the world. I have the old little pull thing and I can run their card and when I get home I punch it into the machine in my office.

Michael: You ought to just ask them if they PayPal and pull up your PayPal account.

John: Right, but then if I’m not online then—and very rarely do I get card that’s not accepted. But if I do, I’ve taken the reservation and I’ve got their phone number and I call them up and say, “You need to give me another credit card because the other one didn’t go through for me.”

I’ve thought about charging them when they make the reservation, occasionally people, the kid broke her arm and we’re not going to be able to do it tonight. Those things happen, you know? I don’t want to charge people that didn’t have fun.

*For more exclusive interviews on business, marketing, advertising and copywriting, go to Michael Senoff's [HardToFindSeminars.com](http://www.hardtfindseminars.com).*

Michael: Tell me some of the most memorable celebrities that you've had in your taxi.

John: Well, did you take a look at my famous faces on my Web site?

Michael: I have here George Lucas, Ringo Starr, Jimmy Buffet.

John: Actually, when Ringo rode in the car I had pitched Alpine Sound System. I figured look I'm getting all this publicity and I've got this high technology of the newest and coolest stuff. I found that if I called up Yamaha and said, "Listen, The Discovery Channel is coming in to do a story about me and I'd like to show them that great new keyboard you guys are selling but I've got the discontinued model from last year. Do you think you could upgrade me?"

So Yamaha started giving me free equipment. I figured if it works for Yamaha maybe it will work for the Sony Camcorders and Hitachi computers. So I started getting a lot of free equipment from big corporations.

My plan was someone is going to see this and say, "This makes a great commercial for Sony camcorders. Capture the moments of your life in a visual package." Maybe I could have a big payday where Sony or a Yamaha or something like that as a product spokesman.

Yamaha did hire me and I trucked the taxi down to Nashville for a big trade show for the music industry.

Michael: How much did they pay you for that?

John: I think they paid me \$10,000. But I had to rent a truck and drive it from Colorado to Nashville, Tennessee. I have a partner to help me get the car on and off the truck so I paid my friend \$700 to come with me for the week and it was an adventure and we filmed the whole thing. I figured we'd do the behind the scenes video of the adventures of the Ultimate Taxi.

One of my friends who was kind of helping when I did the TV show I hired him to use my camera over the shoulder of camera crew so when VH1 was filming me for The World's Smallest Mobile Recording Studio, he was in the huddle with the producers and the camera man discussing how they were going to shoot it and staying out of frame but kind of capturing the experience. I've got hundreds of hours of videos and I've put some clips up on my Web site, but I really could create a whole show.

Michael: The whole show of the experience as a rider did it?

John: The adventure of the Ultimate Taxi, whether we're going on a trip to Las Vegas and I wanted one of these new companies that have the consumer electronic show to use me as at the trade show, but I wasn't able to get a sponsor for that so I just decided, hey, let's just go down to Las Vegas with the taxi ourselves and we'll film the whole trip just to show them who they're dealing with. We'll make the evening news in Las Vegas during the trade show so that when people are in their hotel rooms after the show and turn on the news they're going to see the high tech taxi cab.

So I went down to Las Vegas and we drove to the TV studio and I said, "Listen, I've come here because I've got more lights in my car than the Vegas strip and I've got more magic tricks than Siegfried and Roy. Not a busy night, maybe you want to do a couple of minutes on the cab."

So I wound up doing a couple of TV shows on the Vegas strip with a reporter in the back seat and ran up to the hotel room and filmed the television set with the camcorder and filmed them filming us.

Also if we have local camera crews or if I was driving in the parade I'd film it because I'd figured, and I wasn't thinking monetarily as much as the fact that it was history.

Michael: I want to go through some of the celebrities who you've had in your Ultimate Taxi.

John: This thing about Ringo; he was eating dinner in a restaurant and I was having dinner with the rep from Alpine trying to see if they would buy the sound system for my car. I saw Ringo eating at the table across the dining room so when I saw that they were getting ready to leave I went outside and got the cab which was parked a couple of streets away and parked it in front of the restaurant with all the lights going. When Ringo and the people he was having dinner with, some real estate agent, came out they were like, "Oh, there's the Ultimate Taxi, we have to do this!" Next thing I know I'm entertaining one of the Beatles. You can't really top that.

Michael: Yeah, that's great. How about Jimmy Buffett.

John: Back before I really had the whole experience when I was a taxi driver he was one of my best customers. He had a house about 15 miles down the highway from Aspen. When he'd go to a party late at night with his friends and call a cab, I'm the one that answered the phone and they'd say, "Jimmy needs a ride home." So, I'll take that one, you know.

Michael: How about Clint Eastwood?

John: I had driven around some movie director and I'm not sure who it was. He was staying at the Warner Brother's house and Clint was there and at the end of the ride he says, "I've got to get Clint in the car." So he went in the house and brought our Clint and I did a little show for Clint. Just a little five minute tease.

Fortune Magazine had some conference with Colin Powell and I saw Bob Dole walking down the street and jumped out of my car and said, "Senator Dole, Senator Bradley rode last week and thought it was terrific." He was, "Bradley was in there! Let me in that thing." He had a great sense of humor. I thought, "God, if he'd been this loose when he was running for President..." My wife is a life long Democrat I would have given him a second look. He was a heck of a nice guy.

Michael: How about Michael Eisner?

John: Michael Eisner it was funny. I was at the gas station gassing up and Michael pulled in and he had some rental jeep and he was kind of befuddled because he couldn't figure out where you put the gas in the jeep.

Michael: How did you know it was him?

John: In a small town you know, and actually it was funny, because Michael and I went to the same grammar school in New York City. He was several years ahead of me and I didn't know him when I was at the school. But I knew he went to the same little private school in New York City that I went to.

Michael: So he was trying to figure out where the gas went?

John: Yeah, I walked over to the jeep and I said, "I think it's underneath the license plate on this one." I pulled the license plate and there is where you gas up the jeep. While he was gassing up, I kind of forced him to come over and take a look at the cab and he jumped in the back and he thought it was terrific and then the next day his wife called me and said they had some people coming in at the airport and could you bring them down to our house for us. You bet I can.

Michael: Okay, that's great. And Michael Douglas?

John: Michael Douglas, he rode a couple of times. Matter of fact, he's a very friendly guy. I remember the last time I saw him I was double parked in

front of the hotel and he was just leaving the hotel and he saw me parked behind him and jumped out of the car and he was with his wife. He left his wife in the car and jumped out and came over, shook my hand, "How you doing, John? You look great. Good to see you." So, you know, it's kind of a nice job where you get to not only meet some of the people you respect in the entertainment business but you get to make an impression on them that they can never forget.

Michael: Yeah, that is great. That is exciting. Let me ask you about when it's not night time. Are you driving at all during that time? Or do you just wait until dark?

John: I don't allow TV crews to film me until it gets dark out because the big spotlight in the sky kind of wipes out all of my tricks.

Michael: Yeah, so you're not cabbing during the day?

John: Not at all. Which means in the winter time, it gets dark at 5:15 or 6:00 at night and between 6:00 and 11:00 at night you can stay pretty busy. In the summer time it doesn't get dark until 9:00 or 8:30 and I book my rides an hour apart, because I don't want to feel rushed or rush the people if they are a few minutes late.

I don't want the job to stress me out so I kind of space them out enough so that if I do a 9:00 and a 10:00 that fits. So in the summer time I usually do one or two rides. In the winter time I can do three or four if I feel like it because there is just more night time. But if I do my first ride at 8:00 at night at 6:00 at night I'm charging up the batteries in the trunk and I'm setting up the gift shop and I'm in the car with a hot glue gun fixing anything that fell off the ceiling from the night before. So there is about an hour of prep for every hour I'm actually entertaining.

Entertaining people I could do for free; it's fun, we have a bunch of people in the car and you're having a great time. It's driving it up from town from my house and cleaning the car and the windows and you know all that stuff to try and make it really sharp is the part that is the real job of it.

Michael: Have you had anyone who has thrown up in your cab?

John: Fortunately, I haven't. I think the worst I had was someone who threw up out the window and I had to take the car directly to the car wash and hose it down before I went back to work.

Michael: Have you ever let someone else drive the cab?

John: I really haven't because I'm concerned if I let someone else drive the cab and work the cab that if they got distracted by all the lights and equipment in the car and ran over somebody that would be the end of my career. I know that would give me press, too. The kind of press I didn't want. Ultimate Taxi injures thee, News at 11:00!"

Michael: Where do you keep your car? Do you keep it in a garage?

John: I do. I live in a house that has a little two car garage and my wife's car is on one side of the garage and I'm on the other. When I'm not driving I usually have those battery chargers that you see at the mechanics that keep the batteries topped because even though they are all connected to the generator I drive around at five or ten miles an hour when I'm entertaining and it's not really fast enough to recharge all the batteries and I want to make sure that I have enough power that when I kick on all my lights I don't pull my voltage so far down that the music stops.

Michael: Has that ever happened?

John: Yeah. I mean basically it is a learning experience. I got to the point where I had too much lighting in the car for the battery so I put another battery in the trunk. So I have three car batteries in the trunk and miles of wires and relays and fuses and all sorts of stuff.

Michael: How many miles are on the cab now?

John: You know, the speedometer stopped 300,000 about 15 years ago. But in the last 15 years since I've been driving around town for a couple of miles each night instead of when I was a cab I'd be shooting up and down the highway and putting a couple hundred miles a night on the car. So I don't drive as much. I'm sure there are a half a million miles on the car.

Michael: Have you had to put a new engine in it?

John: Once. The first engine lasted about 250,000 miles. You know, people say, "How many miles a gallon do you get." I say, "It's not miles per gallon, it's smiles per gallon I'm looking for." So if I figure that I made my job really fun and blurred the distinction between work and play, and made it fun for me too, that it could only be good for business in a small town.

Michael: I hope you've enjoyed this magical mystery ride with John Barns and his famous Ultimate Taxi. If you have any questions whatsoever, please email me at [Michael@michaelsenoff.com](mailto:Michael@michaelsenoff.com) or go to [UltimateTaxi.com](http://UltimateTaxi.com).

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