

# New York City Taxi of Tomorrow RFI

## Appendix 3

### Understanding and Leveraging the Value of New York City

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## 1. Creating the Iconic Taxi

### Introduction: Taxi Identity

Look out the window of a Manhattan skyscraper any time of day or night, and you are likely to see a stream of yellow, restlessly parting and converging again. This ebb and flow has become a kind of visual geographic shorthand for New York City, immediately establishing location in innumerable films, television shows, and commercials. Taxi identity does have something to do with that distinct shade of yellow, but the effectiveness of the taxi as an icon goes beyond its color.

At its most sublime, the taxi symbolizes the power and freedom of New York City. Step off the curb, stick an arm in the air and it can take you where you want to go at any time of day or night. Without question, hailing a cab – with its promise of freedom, power, and anonymity – is the quintessential New York City act. This notion is so deeply rooted, that visitors count hailing a cab among top tourist attractions, it's like visiting the Empire State Building or Rockefeller Center. But like so many legends encountered in person, the reality is disappointing.

Stepping into a New York City cab today can bring to mind the vehicular equivalent of Frankenstein's monster. With their many makeshift adaptations, wrought over decades, current cabs whisk passengers through New York City's dynamic streets under circumstances that feel provisional and look like a mess. Although taxis currently provide an essential New York City experience, New Yorkers agree that they should be more ergonomic (for passengers and drivers), more environmentally sustainable, more accessible, even more elegant – in short, more expressive of the values New Yorkers care about right now.

### The Taxi Opportunity

Just as Fifth Avenue or Grand Central Terminal has a distinct public identity enjoyed by anyone who has ever strolled past the Plaza Hotel or stood under the starry ceiling of Grand Central's main hall, so too does the taxi. Taxis dominate New York City's visual landscape, provide a crucial transport link, and constitute the space of entry for millions of tourists every year. Every day, New York's 13,100+ cabs make an average of 470,000 taxi trips carrying 660,000 passengers.

Despite the singular prominence of the New York City taxi – and the profound identification of the yellow cab with the city – no vehicle manufacturer has seized this opportunity to build a brand identity. Since the demise of the beloved Checker in the early 1980s, there has been no meaningful effort to develop an iconic taxi. In fact, vehicle manufacturers have actively rejected associating vehicles with the taxi in part because of fear that the association would diminish brand appeal in other more upmarket contexts.

This outdated conception of the New York City taxi image is incorrect, and underlies a curious failure to capitalize on the strong and overwhelmingly positive image of New York City today. For a host of reasons – not least because New York City has mandated that all taxi vehicles achieve 30 mpg or better by 2012 – the entire New York City taxi fleet is about to undergo a revolution. The image of the new iconic taxi will be inextricable from the brand of New York City which creates a historic opportunity to fill this vacuum and establish one of the strongest brands on the planet. The right vehicle will automatically control the market, and perhaps more importantly, its image and features will be internationally recognized with almost no marketing effort. The quantity of televised images that originate on the streets of the city, the volume of visitors who will experience the new vehicle (including political and business

leaders from every corner of the globe), and the yellow cab's prominence as the icon of New York guarantee that the moment the new vehicle hits the city streets it will be an international sensation.

## **New York City Today**

There can be little argument that New York City stands as a beacon of commerce, art, and culture the world over. Social harmony and economic prosperity prevail in a context of enormous ethnic and racial diversity; there are more languages spoken in the borough of Queens than anywhere on Earth. Although New York City maintains distinctive local neighborhoods, it is also an international city whose identity and well-being is perhaps more closely tied to international centers like London, Dubai or Hong Kong than to other American cities. In every realm – financial, artistic, ideological or otherwise – trends surface in New York City first.

The City has never felt more robust. Hotels are overbooked, theaters are sold out, and any given evening offers hundreds of activities – from sports to opera, avant-garde theater to literary lectures, endless gallery openings to the finest dining anywhere. Even the real estate market seems immune to downturn. Yet thirty years ago, New York seemed unsafe and ungovernable, and was in fact on the brink of bankruptcy. Although the city has changed profoundly since that time, its taxis have not.

Replacing the beloved Checker, the Ford Crown Victoria today makes up about 85% of all taxi vehicles. In its heyday, the Crown Vic eloquently expressed the character of the 1970s and '80s. Through a period of spiraling crime rates and economic and social upheaval, the Crown Vic earned a grudging respect for its durability and endurance. Even its alternate life as a police vehicle – with a back seat designed for people wearing handcuffs – somehow seemed appropriate at the time. Its rolling implication – it takes a tough car to make it in a tough town – suited the zeitgeist.

New York City has emphatically changed. Today the City's character is defined by forward-looking and pragmatic optimism. An important example of municipal confidence can be found in the Bloomberg Administration's recently released book-long plan for New York City's future, *PlaNYC*, which begins:

Thirty years ago, a plan for New York's future would have seemed futile. ... Today, the city is stronger than ever. Transit ridership is at a fifty-year high. Crime is at a forty-year low. We have our best bond rating ever, and the lowest unemployment. A record 46 million tourists came to visit last year. For the first time since World War II the average New Yorker is living longer than the average American. And our population is higher than it has ever been.

Moving to New York has always been an act of optimism. ... This Plan is offered in that spirit.

– *PlaNYC: A Greener, Greater New York*, City of New York, April 2007

Received with global acclaim, this thirty-year plan for the city's environmental health lays out ambitious goals for increasing housing and open space, improving water and air quality, reducing traffic, and increasing energy efficiency, among others.

As *PlaNYC* illustrates, environmental sustainability is a defining value for 21st Century New York, and will be closely associated with any new taxi vehicle. But there are other important values that the new iconic taxi should embody and communicate.

## New York City Taxi Brand Values

In intimate connection with the strength of the New York City brand today, there are three specific brand values that could be developed and expressed through a new iconic taxi. They are:

1. Environmental Sustainability
2. Sophisticated Durability
3. Trendsetting Urban Design for Diverse Users

### 1. Environmental Sustainability

As *PlaNYC* makes clear, environmental sustainability is a core value for New York City today. In fact, all New York City agencies – from housing to transportation, schools to city planning – have been charged with taking steps to implement *PlaNYC*'s goals. Their efforts cut to the very core of how the city will move forward in the future. Here are a few broad systemic examples of possible policies:

- mandating that all new city construction overseen by the NYC Dept. of Design & Construction achieve a LEED rating (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design – the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction and operation of high performance green buildings)
- Increasing the number of street trees planted by the NYC Dept. of Parks to 23,000 a year with the goal of 1,000,000 new street trees by 2030

Due to New York City's high density and public transportation network, it is already one of the most environmentally advanced cities in the nation. As these measures illustrate, the city's association with forward-looking, green policies will only grow stronger.

### 2. Sophisticated Durability

As the saying goes, if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere. This adage will certainly apply to the new iconic taxi, which will have to weather immensely trying conditions. New York City roads are today and will likely remain some of the toughest streets for a vehicle to withstand, despite heroic efforts by the NYC Department of Transportation to maintain city streets. With their aging infrastructure and heavy use, potholes and surface irregularity are a fact of life.

The realities of driving a cab in often-dense traffic conditions will also play a factor in vehicle resilience. Whizzing through crowded streets while scanning for fares, impacts the wear and tear on vehicles, not to mention vehicle safety. And finally, New York City weather must be considered. With city temperatures ranging in an average year from highs in the 90s to lows below freezing, the new iconic taxi will have to be comfortable and safe in the broadest range of conditions.

Of course there are sport utility and crossover vehicles that in some ways already fit the bill under these conditions, but for the most part, these vehicles don't communicate an important point that the new Iconic Taxi could make – urban can be tough. As most of the world's population concentrates in urban settings, there will be a growing demand for tough vehicles

that are also sophisticated and less physically imposing. The new urbanite may not be scaling unpaved back roads, but she will still want to feel safe and in control. Likewise, the new iconic taxi will exemplify sophisticated durability. As a regulatory body having oversight over, among other things, the maintenance and repair of taxicabs, TLC has taken and will continue to aggressively take steps to ensure that taxicabs are clean and well maintained, thereby ensuring the brand value of the sophisticated New York City taxicab.

### 3. Trendsetting Urban Design for Diverse Users

In the end, the success of a new iconic taxi may well rest on an abstract feeling: is it loveable? In the history of New York City cab vehicles, only the Checker met this standard, and the reasons it did are enlightening. Manufactured and produced specifically for use as a taxi in Kalamazoo, Michigan by the Checkered Cab Company, the Checker enjoyed enormous popularity from the moment it hit the streets in the 1920s. From the sizeable back seat with family-friendly jump seats to their incredibly immodest but endearingly bold lines, this big, muscular car blended utility and glamour in a way that was instantly recognizable. The Checker perfectly expressed the character of New York City in the confident, brawny mid-20th century.

By the 1970s, the City's cultural values had changed and the Checker had not. Although still lauded for their durability, the Checker weighed two tons and averaged fifteen miles per gallon. Gas prices soared, inflation reached the double digits, demand grew for more fuel-efficient vehicles, and by the early 1980s they were taken out of production. This era saw the beginning of the current day's practice of converting conventional cars into taxis. Happily, today's reduced design, development and production costs, including platform sharing and flexible manufacturing, have resurrected the possibility of a new iconic taxi and lead to the creation of this Vehicle Technical Specification.

So the question remains, what would make the new iconic taxi as popular and successful as the Checker? Of course, part of the answer lies in designing a vehicle that addresses the values described above: environmental sustainability and sophisticated durability. Beyond function, true success will require adherence to the oldest and most fundamental design aphorism: form follows function.

Throughout New York City history, the most successful civic designs have been those that adhered to high standards of functional clarity. Excellent local examples of civic designs that clearly articulate their function include the New York City subway map, NYC Parks Department World's Fair Bench, Norman Foster's green skyscraper for Hearst, and new subway car interiors and Metrocard vending machines by Antenna Design, to name just a few.

As the examples above demonstrate, elegant and clear design transcends style. Consumers of every stripe – both passengers and the industry – will respond positively to a vehicle that respects their intelligence and design literacy. The appeal of such a vehicle would stem from its technical capacity and integrity of purpose and not from a contrived idea of consumer demand.

## 2. Examples of Media Coverage of the New York Taxi

The international and local media maintain a longstanding love affair with the New York City taxi. When New York City's Mayor Bloomberg announced that all yellow cabs would be going hybrid in May 2007, the event was enthusiastically covered by news sources all over the

world. In October 2007, a new NYC taxi logo was unveiled. *The NY Times* dedicated full pages of both the City Room and Metro Section to this design change. As a response to the public outpouring regarding this design change, *The Times* detailed how the new design evolved and published a series of articles on designer's reactions to the new logos. When the Design Trust for Public Space released their report on New York City taxis in December 2007, it was also featured prominently in the *NY Times* City Room as well as other media outlets around the world.

Another example of the strong public and media interest in the yellow cab was clearly displayed in the phenomenal success of a recent exhibition at the 2007 New York International Auto Show in New York City. Sponsored by a New York City non-profit, the Design Trust for Public Space, the Taxi 07 Exhibit of eight taxi prototypes and taxi system improvements (such as taxi stands) drew more than 100,000 visitors over 12 days. At times the exhibit drew as many as 1,400 people in one hour. Media coverage of the exhibit was extensive with feature stories appearing in newspapers (13), magazines (12), on television (15), radio (5), international media (15) and online (26+), and perhaps most prominently garnering exciting reactions on late night television by Jay Leno and Conan O'Brian.

### 3. Examples of recent successful NYC partnerships

Under Mayor Bloomberg's initiative, NYC has aggressively sought ways to engage in mutually beneficial strategic partnerships with private sector entities. These types of relationships are unique within government and their form is just now taking shape. NYC is open to, and interested in, achieving the best solutions for the NYC taxicab and is prepared to consider any form of a strategic partnership. TLC is interested to learn from auto manufacturers what type of partnership is of interest and how such a partnership will benefit this program and the City directly.

Strategic Integration of Citywide Events and Resources: As the media capital of the United States, New York City is uniquely positioned to offer opportunities that will enhance the marketing and advertising goals of its partners. Imagine the NYC Taxicab:

- Leading each float in the Giants Superbowl victory ticker-tape parade up Broadway;
- Delivering celebrities to the red carpet at any one of the major award events that take place in NYC every year;
- Being unveiled by the Mayor on New Year's Eve in Times Square as the world watches;
- Serving as the official vehicle used on NYCTV, NYC's own cable channel with shows being syndicated throughout the country;
- Parading down Broadway in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade;
- Leading the runners through the City during the NYC Marathon, or any number of other "stunt" based marketing that only NYC can offer.

One example of a current NYC strategic/marketing partnering initiative is the street furniture contract with Cemusa. This 20 year partnership provides immeasurable social benefit to the City by turning 3,500 bus stop shelters from drab brown structures into elements of high design that enhance any street. In addition to providing a minimum of \$100 million in capital costs for new bus shelters, benches and public toilets, Cemusa is also maintaining all street furniture, paying the city at least \$1 billion during the life of the contract and offering 22.5% of the ad space to the City (for ads that could feature the "NYC Taxicab"). In return for this

partnership, Cemusa is placing ads on all the street furniture, which furthers their goal of offering high quality urban outdoor advertisement.

Another example of a current NYC partnering initiative is the vending and marketing agreement between NYC and Snapple that gives Snapple the exclusive right to sell iced tea, water and chocolate drinks on City property. This partnership provides direct money to NYC schools and the general fund, while providing Snapple with access to sponsorship opportunities at events like Summer Stage in Central Park, which allows it to further its core brand identity.

## **4. Partnership opportunities with automotive supplier companies**

Vehicle manufacturers are not the only companies that can benefit from partnering with New York City on the Taxi of Tomorrow. Multiple Tier 1 supplier companies have also expressed interest in partnering with an OEM on the Taxi of Tomorrow. These companies are enthusiastic about the opportunity to prominently feature their technologies and fuel saving ideas in New York City and recognize the benefit they can derive from co-marketing. The City encourages OEMs to explore partnerships with Tier 1 suppliers as you develop the response to this RFI. Furthermore, if you are a Tier 1 supplier and are interested to participate in this program, please respond to the RFI with your specific ideas. NYC is open to, and interested in, achieving the best solutions for the NYC Taxicab and prepared to consider any form of a strategic partnership.