

A virtual magic carpet ride

By [Our Reporter](#)

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Finding a more effective way of summoning a taxi in San Francisco gave birth to an app that is growing into a global on-demand e-commerce business.



San Franciscans got sick and tired of waiting around for their coach to pick them up and take them home. So an app came to their rescue. (Image: Aaron Logan, from www.lightmatter.net/gallery/albums.php, via Wikimedia Commons)

In the beginning...

Once upon a time, not so long ago, San Franciscans were getting sick and tired of waiting around for their coach to pick them up and take them home from the ball before the witching hour. Sadly, sometimes it didn't turn up at all.

So along came a fairy godperson (this is after all the age of negating gender stereotypes) called Uber, who created a little magic in their lives.

"Now, you push a button and a car comes... Simple," says Patrick Studener, international launcher of Uber.

How it works is that a passenger uses the app to hook them up with a taxi that's already in area. This is also a win situation for drivers as it eliminates any downtime from being off the meter while waiting for fares.

The service has grown from three rides in San Francisco to operations in more than 20 countries. Studener has been in Cape Town for the past few months to introduce the app, after a successful launch in Joburg. He'll be moving on to Durban shortly, to launch there.

"The secret sauce", as Studener calls it, "is local expertise". The company's community manager and the staff in any given

city are all locals, who are able to tap into their indigenous knowledge to see what works best in their neighbourhood.

Given our propensity to enjoy a good party and a serious lack of public transport, having Uber's services available in the major South African cities seems like a match made in heaven. And it's catching on fast.

"Momentum is a big thing in our growth," he says, explaining that each launch is easier the one before. "We caught on much quicker in Cape Town, because people had heard about it or had used it in Joburg, and we expect an even greater awareness in Durban."

It's infectious

"How do we create virality?" he asks. "By spreading the love."

This includes a split fare option called Give 90. Get 90. Uber users send out their account code to their friends via social media and if the friends use the service they get R90 off their first ride and the subscriber gets a R90 credit for each take up. Studener says one guy in the States uses this so effectively that he hasn't paid a fare in about 50 rides.

The company also handles all the payments, so no money changes hands between passenger and driver.

Before launching in any city, the company carries out an extensive stealth campaign, where Secret Ubers take the service and the drivers for an undercover test drive. The drivers are thoroughly vetted before they are put on the company's books, which is a very good thing to know, given some of the rather dodgy taxi drivers around.

But wait... There's more

Not just content with transporting people from A to B, Uber has also come up with some pretty amazing on-demand delivery stunts.

Picture this. It's a blistering hot summer's day, and all you can think about is a deliciously cool ice cream. You close your eyes and wish...

Wait, what that? Could that be the sound of an ice cream truck?

Well, if it was 19 July this year, this little daydream could have become a reality if you live in New, York, London, Singapore, Sydney or one of 28 other cities across the globe. Uber teamed up with local producers and promised on-demand ice cream delivery through their app. The demand was huge.

Ag shame!

If this isn't emotional blackmail, nothing is.

If you were resident in New York, Seattle or San Francisco on National Cat Day (yes, there is such a thing), a cute furry baby cat from the local shelter was delivered to your door for a 15-minute petting session. Needless to say, none of kittens were returned to the shelters at the end of the day.

Its activations such as these that go viral and create brand awareness, basically because most people do like to believe that fairytales can come true.

"Odds are if what you do is edgy, people will notice. Do something exciting that will make them jump out of their seats, and if it's a great product they will use it again," says Studener.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes

Although, having cars, kittens and ice creams appear at the touch of a button seems magical, there are no doubt hundreds of little elves working frantically behind the scenes to make it happen.

Studener says that Uber's staff members are often the source of inspiration for these ideas, the kitten delivery service being a case in point, and no matter how crazy or unrealistic it may seem, its handed over to what he calls a sprint team, that will brainstorm the idea and work out the logistics.

Hopefully their next crazy idea will come to a city near you.

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