



Chris MacDonald

Uber Is Built on Trust

Uber isn't in the taxi business. It's not really in the dispatch business, or even in the tech business.

It's in the "trust" business. That is, it's in the business of building trust between strangers. And if it can't figure out how to do that, it will fail.

Uber's "UberX" program hit a horrifying bump back in December of 2014 when one of its drivers in Delhi allegedly raped a female passenger. The incident earned the company a complete ban throughout the Delhi region, and is sent shockwaves through a much broad-

Some of these problems can be overcome through smarter use of technology — and after all, that's what Uber is supposed to be good at. But it's important to see that the key to Uber's success isn't its mobile app, which is pretty easy to replicate. The key is the company's ability to get strangers to trust each other. If Uber wants to keep its recent \$40 billion valuation, it's going to have to figure that out.

This is because commerce — all commerce — relies upon trust. When I hop into a taxi, I'm not just buying a ride to a destination. I'm engaging in an exchange of trust. Think about it: *I'm getting into a car with a stranger.* And the driver is letting a stranger into his car. But the branding of the cab company, plus the municipal licensing, give me as passenger some assurance that a) I'm

going to get where I ask to go; b) I'll arrive there alive; and c) I'll be given the correct change even if I fail to count it. We all take this for granted. Uber got big by leveraging that pre-existing trust that most of us have in taxis. And what it added was its third-party geographical and financial tracking, which allows us to trust not just branded taxi drivers, but "amateur" UberX drivers too. I can, with a relatively high degree of personal and financial safety, climb into the unmarked car of an amateur driver, and both of us can be assured that the financial end of the transaction will be smooth, all because Uber's app makes it so.

The key question, then, is whether Uber will be able to sustain that trust. I should add that it's not just about customers. Trust has to be built and maintained between the company and its drivers, too. I spoke to one Uber driver recently who said that some drivers have left Uber because

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er global community of users and potential users of UberX.

For all its success, Uber has had plenty of troubles. It's been accused of anti-competitive behaviors. It's been accused of privacy violations.

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of how the company has treated them. He suggested such drivers feel that in introducing UberX, the company has effectively turned its back on the *professional* drivers that helped build the brand. Maybe the company doesn't care about the professional drivers — maybe its long game lies with UberX. But if informed and experienced professional drivers don't trust Uber, it's hard to see how amateurs are going to do so.

So, Uber needs two things in order to build and maintain trust. First, it needs to make smarter use

of the technology at its fingertips. Some of that is already in place — simple, trustworthy financial transactions are clearly a key component of the company's success to date. But it also needs to assure users that, for example, the company can be trusted with the vast amounts of data it gathers on their travel behavior. Finally, the company needs not just the technical infrastructure of trust; it needs to engage in the behavior that will signal to users that the company is here to stay, here to be trusted, here to be a

reliable and trustworthy service provider for the long run.

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NEWS AND NOTES

ISTAS 2016: An Update

The Steering Committee and organizing team of ISTAS 2016 is glad to report that the planning process for the Symposium is proceeding according to schedule. At this time, we are in the process of publicizing the CFP and are accepting paper submissions. For more information, please visit our website at <http://istas2016.org>

Here are a couple of updates:

- The deadline for paper submission has been extended to 1 June 2016. The latest CFP can be found on p. 6 of this issue, and is available at <http://istas2016.org/cfp/>.
- The Steering Committee has decided to have a Community Engagement Workshop, an IEEE Young Professionals workshop, and a Women in Engineering (WiE) workshop during Day 0 (Oct. 20, 2015) of the Conference. The Community Engagement Workshop will bring

together practitioners and organizations involved in socially relevant technologies. For more information on the program, please check <http://istas2016.org/programme/>.

We request you to kindly encourage paper submissions to ISTAS 2016 from interested communities that you are in touch with. We also invite you to Trivandrum, Kerala, India, during October 2016, to participate in person!

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