

Excerpt from *Uber Mensch: Insights from Behind the Wheel*

“Aww, come on, man, just tell me *who* it was!” my brother Marcus pleaded.

“I can’t. *I can’t!*” I insisted.

Our wives were on a spa retreat in Palm Springs so Marcus drove up to Santa Rosa to spend the weekend with me. I hadn’t seen him in two years, only because he’d expanded his surgical practice and had no time to breathe.

He was my older brother. And, kind of typical in Jewish families, the favorite.

“Why can’t you be more like your brother?” my mom would caw. Constantly.

“Ma,” I’d start, knowing I could never win the argument, “I’m just not good with all that science crap. I’ve gotta be around people.”

“Oy, you’re going to be the death of me. Just finish college. That’s all I want,” she’d beg.

So all these years later with my mother now a widow and on the verge of turning 80, the tide turned. While she would never, ever, admit she had a favorite, I found her calling me once a week to ask how I was doing. In all my years of college and young adulthood, after my first marriage came and went and my second marriage saw me the happiest I’d been in life, my mother only called on holidays and birthdays.

Until I became a driver. Or as they say in the biz to make what we do seem upper class, *peer-to-peer transportation*.

After years of job-hopping in the security, legal, and operations industries, I’d given up on ever finding that “people” job that I always wanted. Until one day, one of my closest friends called me from L.A.

“Eddie, how’s it going? Long time no talk!” Lee said.

It was great to hear from him. He was best man at my (happy) second wedding, and I could always rely on him for sound advice and unconditional friendship.

“Eh. I’ve been doing security. Graveyard. I hate it,” I lamented.

“You should try limo. I just drove (enter the name of a blond 1960s pop princess here) and she tipped me \$50 for a 30-minute ride!”

We talked at length about the pros and cons. He was in his 50s and happily married; he and his wife were “dinks” and lived in L.A. in a rent-controlled, heritage apartment building that actor James Garner built for his mother.

“I really like the job, but it’s a young man’s game. Livvy works regular hours but I maybe see her for an hour a day, if I’m lucky,” he said.

I didn't like hearing *that*. But around that time, Uber and Lyft became game changers in the transportation industry. You could take the jobs you wanted, when you wanted. You weren't shackled to a dispatcher who might hate you because you remind her of her ex and, as a result, either didn't give you work or just managed to give you the dreck that no one else wanted.

So I became a driver. And while I can't tell you who I've driven in this glorious city known as the Big Apple, I have friends who drive limousines in the City of Angels, the City of Brotherly Love, the City by the Bay, and other metropolis' in this country who could start fires with how hot their stories are. They drive many famous clients and have great stories that they can never tell...*sort of*. Every client wants to feel that his or her privacy will be respected. With limousine companies, their drivers are required to sign confidentiality agreements. Confidentiality is king. The quickest way to get fired and sued is to pass on a story to TMZ that only you and your passengers would know about.

But nothing stops their *friends* from sharing the juicy details.

I knew a driver who used to get \$100 every time he tipped off the paparazzi (or "Papps") when he picked up a celebrity. If enough of these incidents got reported, it wouldn't take long before a dispatcher figured out what was going on. It's also not unusual for a driver to get blamed for tipping them off when it's the dispatcher who's really doing it. The limo business and the extra bucks that can be easily made in big cities can attract some very unsavory types; and those aren't just the *owners* of the companies!

Back to confidentiality. The safest thing is to say *nothing* about *anything* that happens in your car. But at the end of the day, it's not uncommon for some drivers to get together and go over their day at a local diner or a bar. Some drivers spill everything with names *and* all their dirty laundry. Those guys will never get hired by the classiest companies with high-end clients because they've marked themselves. Other drivers will tell a great story about a client, but not name the client unless it's a positive story and doesn't invade their privacy. These guys are appreciated, but will still never get the best jobs. There are drivers who've seen everything and divulge nothing. These guys get the best clients, the best tips, and harbor the greatest chances of reaching the levels of highly sought after private drivers for celebrities.

And there's a lot more I've learned about the industry-and about myself-now that I'm literally in the driver's seat. This world isn't just about celebrities showing up to premieres in fancy cars.

Street Legal

But being sued isn't the worst thing that can happen to drivers who talk too much. One guy I knew got dispatched to drive a famous rapper and his crew for three days. The first time he drove them, they directed him to a mansion in the Hollywood Hills. They came out a few minutes later and lit up in the back of the car. This was well before pot was legal in California. If he'd been pulled over for any reason, he would have been as guilty as the potheads in his car.

A few weeks later, the rappers returned and requested him as their driver. He asked if they wanted to go to the same house again to score before going to the hotel. They were surprised, but said, "Sure." I shook my head and suggested he never do that again. It doesn't matter what the client does wherever they go. You are a driver, period. You can have *nothing* to do with their activities. Once you acknowledge a criminal act, you become a participant in it, and you may be considered as complicit as they are in the eyes of the law.

This guy thanked me for the heads-up, but I heard enough stories later to know that he was still trying to be the “cool driver” by creating huge risks for himself. He once asked me to go into business with him. There was no way I’d align myself with someone who took such stupid and unnecessary chances.

Bad Eggs

You’re going to hear things in cars you won’t hear in everyday life. You won’t always like it. It may be racist, sexist, or just plain ignorant. You have a choice to ignore it or internalize it and decide you don’t want that current client as a future client. That’s fine. A driver should never feel uncomfortable in his own car. Don’t get into an argument. If you witness something illegal, abusive or threatening toward you or another passenger, pull over at the first safe opportunity and end that ride for the client and everyone else in the car. Yes. You CAN kick clients out of your car.

Burnout

If you get to the point where you think everyone you drive is a moron, then you are in burnout mode and you need a break. Sometimes you can resolve this by cutting back on hours or changing the hours you work. If this doesn’t work and you can’t get over it, you may have to switch careers because your ratings will reflect the quality of your service, which can’t help but go down during a time of burnout.

Celebrities

As a peer-to-peer driver you won’t run into too many celebrities, but it happens. It happens more for limo drivers because of the prestige celebs have when they show up in a fancy limousine. If your favorite actor or musician pops into your car, it’s best to acknowledge them as you would any passenger. No gushing, ever. Don’t pull a Chris Farley interviewing Paul McCartney. This will make them uncomfortable and you will look unprofessional.

When my clients get in the car I give them my standard greeting, ask about their destination and let them control the conversation. If they’re famous, many times they just want a normal experience. If they need or want to talk, they will.

My Day

No matter what kind of day you’re having, never tell your client about it. Don’t bring them down. There is no plus side to laying a story of difficulty or sadness on a client, and it usually lowers the tone. That doesn’t mean it won’t happen, but if you brighten their day, there’s a good chance they’ll be happy to see you again and again.

I recently drove a woman who was meeting her Facebook friend for the first time. As they spoke on her cell I could hear their excitement to meet and only learned after the call that my client was bringing a wig to her friend like the one she was wearing because they were both going through chemo. I was glad they had each other to share their experiences and fears and celebrate their milestones in treatment. She gave me a pink rubber breast cancer awareness wristband which I keep-to this day-on the gearshift.

It's Nothing Personal

As far as *your* confidentiality, it’s best to not share too much about yourself with a client. You never know whom you are driving and there are people who will take advantage of any weakness

they perceive. Knowing where you live or what your problems are is key information that scammers latch onto. Anyone with a big story that insists you're his or her savior when you've only just met is probably looking to take advantage of you. If it doesn't feel right, finish the ride and get down the road. Don't fall for sympathy stories. There are good/bad reasons some people have no one to help them besides the person they just met.

You Are Not A Friend

No matter how many times you've driven a client and how nice they are and how great their tips are, you're in a business relationship. You are *not* their friend. This is especially true with wealthy clients. Unless you get together outside of the work environment and you have equal say as to what you do during your time together, you are not their friend. If they're paying all the time, you are not their friend. Make one step too far and you'll reveal something, or do something that will end what could have been a lucrative client/driver relationship for years to come. You are "the help." Accept anything offered graciously and appreciate it for what it is. If anyone steps over a line, let it be the client stepping over yours. If you overstep your bounds with that client you assumed was you "friend," then you've probably lost their business for good.

Sex

Sex won't often be a problem for drivers in sedans, but it does happen. Usually there's alcohol involved. A lot of it. If you've watched any taxi confession shows you've seen what can happen. Remember, it's your car and you do not have to tolerate activity that makes you uncomfortable. Also, with alcohol comes the chance of a big mess that may be more unpleasant to clean up than the extra charge to the client is worth. And just because you have a car with video capability for your protection, it does not give you the right to post that video or sell it. You could create more problems for yourself. You also need to think about what may be required to freshen up your car before you can pick up your next client.

My buddy Lee worked for a company in Malibu and was assigned a brand new stretch limo to drive. The first week he drove it he transported a VIP client-a billionaire in his 50s with a 30-something girlfriend. Everything was going great until the drive back to his beach house from their dinner at Spago in Beverly Hills. The client raised the solid divider for privacy on the ride home. And then something started going wrong with the car. It felt as if the transmission was slipping. He started to think the worst. *Would the car make it all the way back to the client's home or would he have to call for another car? Would he be blamed for the car breaking down? Would he lose his job?*

He slowed down to baby the transmission, but the slipping seemed to get worse. And then he approached a red light. As he slowed, the slipping got worse and worse. But as he came to a complete stop, the slipping movement morphed into bouncing. Something clicked in his brain. A smile came to his face and he realized the car was fine. The rest of the drive was quiet and uneventful. Upon reaching the client's house, Lee received a \$300 cash tip from two very happy, glowing clients.

"Ma, Ma! Are you there?" Stupid iPhone.

"Oh Eddie," my mom giggled. "You were always my favorite son!"