

Following Uber's success, copycats rush to carve out niches



Foot traffic streams past Uber offices on Market Street in San Francisco. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group/TNS)

by Patrick May

Budding entrepreneurs hoping to cash in on the wave of collaborative consumption breaking across the nation are hitching their wagons to the King Kong of the sharing economy, claiming to be the “Uber of whatever” — food delivery, diaper service, dog-walking, you name it.

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In other words, we have become the Uber of Uber-obsessed nations.

“We run into this issue of consumers not quite understanding what we do,” says Jeryl Detmer, co-founder of what he likes to think of as “the Uber of trailer rentals,” based in Ojai, about 60 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles. “Either they’re totally into the peer-to-peer or sharing economy, or they give you that deer-in-the-headlights look. But when we say, ‘We’re like Uber,’ they suddenly get it.”

Ride-booking pioneer Uber, along with Airbnb, its kissing cousin in the accommodations space, has sent the sharing economy into overdrive. Valued at \$50 billion and operating in 61 countries at last count, Uber has become a household — if sometimes controversial — word. Defined as “a superlative example of its kind or class,” Uber has become a hip shorthand for

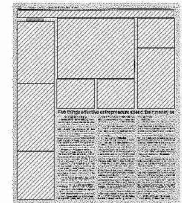
efficient transportation and seamless commerce, a digital darling that turns your smartphone into a matchmaker between you and your ride home.

It has also become the marketing tool du jour.

There are Ubers of party planners ([GigSalad](#)) and Ubers of real estate (SQFT), Ubers of storage units (SpareFoot) and Ubers of babysitting (The Babysitting Company). With scores of startup founders and their marketing teams Uberizing their sales pitch to investors, media and customers, this metaphor-lobbing mob is using Uber as if it’s some magical password to profits and fame. Sometimes, it’s the end user who drops the U word.

“Often the first thing we hear from customers is ‘Oh, so you’re like the Uber of babysitting?’” said Cory Charlupski, whose Miami Beach, Fla.-based Babysitting Company hooks up child care for clients at home, in a hotel or on the road. He says he wears the Uber badge with honor: “If anyone says they don’t want to be the Uber of something, they’re lying, because everyone would love to eventually own a company worth \$50 billion.”

Uber, which declined to comment for this report, has experienced a supersonic growth spurt since 2009 when it was founded as “UberCab” by Travis Kalanick and Garrett Camp.





As it spread to more than 300 cities around the world, here and overseas, the company has raised more than \$5 billion from investors, including a \$258 million investment by Google Ventures, even as its service has been challenged at every turn by governments and traditional taxi services.

But the flattery goes on, with the Uber craze even spawning hybrids. Take UpCounsel, which calls itself “a cross between Uber and eHarmony — the on-demand marketplace matching lawyers and small businesses to curated legal counsel.” Or consider Online Owls, a peer-to-peer service based in Washington, D.C., that pairs frustrated computer users with IT whizzes who’ll race to their rescue in Uberesque fashion. “What happens when you pair Uber and GeekSquad?” they ask in their Facebook ad. “Click to find out!”

There are, however, possible pitfalls in over-Uberizing, said longtime Silicon Valley marketing professor Buford Barr. Despite Uber’s phenomenal popularity, its success has been accompanied by legal obstacles and PR disasters as the San Francisco-based firm tends to bully its way into new markets. Or as Barr puts it, “Everything hasn’t been a bed of roses for Uber.”

Some startups that used Uber as a marketing gimmick in the past now run the other way.

“Trust me,” said Corey Brundage, whose Los Angeles-based Honk has been called by some “The Uber of roadside assistance,” an entrepreneur looking for venture capital funding “better avoid that Uber comparison. Because the minute you tell potential investors that you’re ‘the Uber of X,’ they immediately start worrying about the negative connotations, like how are you classifying your employees.

“When we did our Series A round,” Brundage said, “I tried to strike Uber from my vocabulary.”

So has Mark Steiner, whose Missouri-based GigSalad has been called both the “Airbnb and the Uber of event planning.”

“I’d just as soon never have it said again,” said Steiner, who now believes non-Uber marketing can adequately describe to clients what the company actually does. But that’s not to say Steiner is completely opposed to the concept of piggyback marketing.

“I hope someday to hear someone say, ‘We’re the Gigsalad of whatever,’” he says, “because that’ll mean I’ve arrived.”

With its sensational success, Uber has spawned a multitude of wannabes, startups that either refer to themselves or are referred to by others as the “Uber of whatever.” Here are a few examples:

Honk — the Uber of roadside assistance

HomeHero — the Uber of in-home care for seniors

Push for Pizza — the Uber of pizza

Swifto — the Uber of dog-walking

SpareFoot — the Uber of storage units

nspHire — the Uber of job search (also been called “the Tinder for jobs”)

GigSalad — the Uber of event planning

SQFT — the Uber of real estate

The Babysitting Company — the Uber of babysitting

UpCounsel — “a cross between the Uber and eHarmony of legal counsel”

Online Owls — the Uber of IT (refers to itself as a cross between Uber and Geek Squad)

Instacart — the Uber of grocery delivery

Washio — the Uber of laundry

Saucey — the Uber of alcohol

GreenPal — the Uber of lawn care

Privlo — the Uber of mortgage lending

BloomThat — the Uber of flower delivery

Eaze — the Uber of weed

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