



Yellow Cab is using the city's most identifiable No. 7, Denver Broncos quarterback John Elway, to promote its new phone number

Cab companies compete by the numbers

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In the taxi cab business, ticking meters measure success in miles and fares. But in Denver's depressed cab industry, success takes more.

It takes a lucky number, like 3 or 7.

Fourteen months after Metro Taxi, Inc. entered the Denver market with its all-3s telephone number, larger competitor Yellow Cab has bet on 7s. And Zone Cab is considering changing its number.

The numbers games started in July 1985, when Metro Taxi bought Ritz Cab and hit the road with one of the city's catchiest phone numbers - 333-3333. Its slogan, "all you need is 3," is painted in the orange, blue and white cabs.

"We thought that was kind of a coup for Metro." Yellow Cab marketing director Joe Gagan said. "We had wanted a really good number like that for a while."

The 50-year-old Yellow Cab didn't want to lose customers to the clever newcomer, especially when the taxi business in Denver already had dipped 5% to 10% the past year because of the slumping local economy, Gagan said.

So Yellow Cab, Denver's largest taxi company, intensified its efforts to purchase a similarly memorable phone number. Gagan had been negotiating to purchase a carpet cleaning company's number, 444-4444, but the rug cleaner wanted \$100,000.

Gagan said he also regularly pestered a service representative at Mountain Bell to release 777-7777, which was a test number used internally at the phone company.

"I was working with a really nice woman at the phone company, but she just couldn't convince her bosses to let us have it," Gagan said. "I never gave up. I even sent letters to her boss about how great she was."

Finally last September, he said, the woman talked her supervisors into giving up the number. "We got the number just for

the installation charge, which felt to us like paying a quarter," Gagan said.

"We would have bought the number if we had to," he said. "In a service business like this, a number like that pays for itself."

Jim O'Brien, general manager of Metro Taxi, said the company's five owners purchased its telephone number, but he declined to discuss the seller or price.

Yellow Cab is using the city's most identifiable No. 7, Denver Broncos quarterback John Elway, to promote its new phone number. Elway appears on Yellow Cab billboards throughout the city, and will star in newspaper ads soon, Gagan said.

Meanwhile, Zone Cab, the smallest of Denver's three major taxi companies, is "looking into" a new number, general manager John Sellens said. "But we may get a real hard one," Sellens joked, "and cater to intellectuals."

At Yellow Cab, the new phone number is just part of the company's efforts to build business. Gagan said Metro Taxi hasn't di-

rectly hurt Yellow Cab, but having another taxi company competing for a limited amount of business has.

The 50-year-old cab company also recently ordered \$60,000 worth of matchbooks, which it will provide to Denver-area bars and restaurants, urging drinkers to take cabs rather than drive.

"If you're lit tonight," the matchbooks read, "call Yellow Cab."

"The cab business is a good barometer of the economy," he said "and the economy is down. Five years ago, we were out of control with so much business. But now, cabs are a luxury item."

Gagan said cab companies that concentrate on airport business have been hurt by the shutdown of Frontier Airlines this fall.

But Yellow Cab's "bell" business, or phone-in business, remains strong, he said. "Metro is starting to be the dominant cab at the airport, but they get only one-one-hundredth the call business we do."