

Free gasoline for cabbies? It's a fare deal

BY DAVID ROEDER
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Some Chicago cabbies struggling with high gas prices got help Wednesday from an unlikely source — their boss.

Simon Garber, president of Chicago Carriage Cab Co., began passing out \$50 gift cards to each of his 637 cab drivers. The cards are redeemable at any BP station.

The present cost Garber nearly \$32,000 and amounts to just a day's worth of fuel for a typical driver. Garber, however, said his gesture was worth it if it brings attention to the cabbies' plight.

He encouraged customers to give cabbies better tips, since meter rates are fixed by law. "I see people working 14 hours instead of 12 hours to make up the money," said Garber, a former New York City driver.

His tactic caught his biggest competitor by surprise. "We have not given out free gas," said Kelly Douglas, president of Yellow Cab Co. "No — jeez, that's a lot of cash."



Chicago Carriage Cab Co. President Simon Garber (center) gives \$50 gas cards to some of his cabbies Wednesday. —JOHN H. WHITE / SUN-TIMES

Douglas turned to her calculator, and concluded a similar program at Yellow would run more than \$80,000. She said Yellow has other deals for drivers, including free car washes and tows, and a Yellow Card for customers that includes a built-in 17 percent tip.

Chicago Carriage drivers praised

the Garber giveaway, even if it yields only temporary relief. "A fill-up is about \$45, and I get it in the suburbs, where it costs me less," said a Chicago Carriage driver downtown who asked to be known only as Peter. "As soon as I get low on gas I just call it a day, because it's not worth it to get it in the city."

Garber said he gave out a couple hundred of the cards Wednesday morning, and will distribute the rest in the coming days as drivers who lease by the week stop by the headquarters at 2617 S. Wabash.

Garber launched Chicago Cab in 2003, opting for maroon vehicles with larger rear-passenger leg

room to distinguish his company and promising to school drivers on high standards of service. He continued that theme in speaking to some drivers Wednesday, telling them to "stay polite, stay courteous, and give your best service to get the best tips."

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