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BUSINESS

Online Carpooling Gets a Boost from High Gas Prices

Now that gas costs more than \$4 dollars a gallon in Illinois, people are looking for ways to drive less and are finding answers online. Carpool Websites are thriving.

Search online for “carpool chicago” and you'll find tens of thousands of links to wade through. You get a sense of who's looking and where, either for a one time trip or a daily commute. Here are some dramatic re-enactments of listings posted by virtual hitchhikers and drivers on a site called carpoolworld.com.

AD ONE (male): Midlothian to Chicago: I have flexible hours and am just tired of always paying so much for gas when there has to be a cheaper way out.

AD TWO (female): Belvidere to Rockford. I only need a ride for a week and am willing to pay for gas. Good listener, I mind my own business. Shy at first, but warm up quickly! Free time interests: Dancing, Family, Listening to music.

AD THREE (male): Sandwich to Lisle. I am flexible on the start and end times. Employment status: full time technical, science, engineering. TV watching habits: I don't watch TV! Languages spoken: Dutch.

Carpoolworld is based in Montreal, but is international—you can find or offer rides anywhere from Rolling Meadows to Dubai. Isabelle Boulard started it in 2000.

BOULARD: The first entry screen that we had was not 'Put your home and work addresses', it was enter your origin and destination and latitude and longitude, so it wasn't really popular.

As you might imagine. So they fixed it. And with gas prices shooting up, users have tripled since last December. About 60,000 people have trips on the site right now, and more than 100 people signed up last month in Illinois. It's free to join, but you can charge or offer payment for gas if you want. Another site, called PickupPal.com, is taking a more aggressive financial approach.

PICKUPPAL VIDEO: You know, with over 250 million vehicles in North America,

chances are, someone out there is going my way.

Pickupal lets drivers offer rides for a price, which passengers can bid on. Once a bid's accepted, money's exchanged through Paypal and the site takes a 7 percent commission. Cofounder John Stewart says that in practice, the month-old site works like this:

STEWART: If you charge a hundred dollars we sent the passenger back a quick email telling them that there's good news, there's a driver that can take them, then if the passenger accepts that offer then what we do is we issue the drive and the passenger and official ticket to ride, we call it. Which is essentially something that each party prints out and they present it to each other so it's like your bus ticket.

Stewart says drivers can also charge nothing, if they want. He says that in May, Pickupal had about 2,500 signups worldwide, with about 200 daily users in Illinois. Stewart does warn that some car insurance doesn't cover carrying passengers for profit, so big markups are at the driver's discretion. Just like who you end up emailing, talking, meeting and travelling with. Isabelle Boulard of Carpoolworld.com says she's heard some good stories.

BOULARD: We've had reports of people finding soulmates and getting married after finding a carpool partner.

All this might seem to fly in the face of your mother's good advice to never get into a stranger's car. With that in mind, Carpoolworld and Pickupal both strongly recommend everyone use common sense, and not drive with anyone who doesn't seem right.