

'I'm an engine-idler vigilante'

As told to Sarah Duguid

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Wall Street banker George Pakenham confronts drivers who keep their engines running while stationary: "My success rate with cops is only 5 per cent"

I was walking around my neighbourhood in Manhattan one spring evening two years ago when I came across a stretch limousine parked outside a restaurant. The driver's clients were inside having dinner, and he had his engine running while he waited. It really bothered me. He was polluting the air we breathe as well as wasting huge amounts of gas, so I knocked on the driver's window.

I explained to him that he didn't need to waste his boss's money, or pollute our air. I addressed the issues politely and after a 10-minute conversation he agreed to shut off the engine. I felt empowered – I could make a difference to our environment. I decided to have these conversations on a regular basis.

Six months later, I talked to a guy who turned out to be an undercover police officer. He told me he wouldn't turn off his engine because he was on a job but asked me if I knew there was actually a law against engine idling. I went home and checked New York City's traffic laws and, sure enough, you could be fined up to \$2,000 for engine idling for more than three minutes. I had small business cards printed up that referred to the relevant law on one side and the penalties on the other, and started to hand them out to idlers. I've been doing it ever since.

I start my encounters the same way every time. I say: "Excuse me for bothering you, but are you aware that it is against the law in New York City to idle your car for more than three minutes?" It always takes people by surprise. They want to know who I am, am I a cop? I tell them that I'm just a concerned citizen and want to make sure we improve our environment and address our oil addiction. We usually have a discussion and I always try to conclude the encounter on a positive and polite note, saying how great it would be if they shut off their engine so we can all have a better environment. I also tell them they'll save money and not break the law. I'm successful 78 per cent of the time. Of course, there are people who are aggressive or who won't do it. My success rate with cops is only 5 per cent.

I keep an Excel spreadsheet so I have precise records of each of my encounters. If I have an aggressive encounter, I list their comments and highlight it in red. Comments might read: "21 Jun, bus, male, he told me 'F.U.' twice", or "11 Sep, limo, he gave me the finger, we shared F.U.s". Some people just crinkle up the card and toss it out the window. I try not to get affected emotionally. I try to approach them professionally but when you are cussed at, it doesn't feel very nice. Someone told me to go put my mouth down the tailpipe. My feelings were hurt but what am I going to do? I'm the aggressor, they are sitting there going, "Who is this guy?"

I work as a banker on Wall Street. I'm careful not to have encounters near my office – I am very nervous about knocking on the wrong window and getting fired. It has also affected my relationship with my girlfriend because at the moment I'm spending my weekends making a documentary about engine idling. It's been a huge bone of contention but I hope my film will be a mass media device to spread awareness of this problem.

To date, I have had 2,500 encounters and, overall, I hope to have made a difference. I'm in touch with the American Lung Association and my work is endorsed by the Environmental Defense Fund. I think engine idling will become as big a deal as second-hand smoking. And on January 22 of this year an NYPD traffic cop wrote the city's very first ticket for idling.

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