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Entrepreneurs

Get Your Tickets Fixed

Daniel Fisher, 10.04.04

Glen Bolofsky goes a little nuts about violations. That's what it takes to stay one step ahead of City Hall.

The history of liberty has largely been the history of the observance of procedural safeguards." When U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter wrote those words in 1943, he probably didn't have Glen Bolofsky in mind. Frankfurter was talking about an unfair murder rap, not a parking violation. But Bolofsky seems to have taken the jurist to heart. For 21 years he has helped motorists find loopholes and technicalities to beat what he considers one of the most oppressive, arbitrary regimes on the planet: the New York City Parking Violations Bureau. "What we're about is freedom," says the 48-year-old accountant, who runs his company out of a cramped [office](#) in Paramus, N.J. "The freedom to drive into the city, park your car and not get ticketed or towed."

By the Numbers

Meter Mania

The Big Apple counts on half a billion in ticket revenue each year.

36 The number of different agencies with the authority to write parking tickets in NYC.

\$85 The average fine.

11% The fraction of tickets thrown out or reduced on appeal.

Source: NYC Parking Violations Bureau.

York issues about 9 million tickets a year, bringing in as much as \$500 million in revenue, but more than 1 million of those are dismissed or reduced on appeal.

Most people might think they already have that freedom--by obeying the signs or keeping the parking meter stocked with quarters. Bolofsky begs to differ. He expects to take in \$3 million in revenue this year via Parkingticket.com, a site that guides customers through the sometimes byzantine process of appealing a ticket. Mostly it's a matter of looking for procedural slipups--transposed license-plate digits or the wrong time of day--but a fair number of tickets are outright wrong. The City of New

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Bolofsky's sworn enemy in this enterprise is Martha Stark, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's commissioner of finance. Seated in her high-ceilinged office in the grimy downtown Municipal Building, Stark says her job is to make Bolofsky's site unnecessary. Following Bloomberg's mandate to streamline city services, her department has made it easier for drivers to track and challenge tickets online and has ordered its administrative law judges to look for the most common errors. "I don't think there's any reason to pay someone to do something you could do yourself," says Stark.

The ultimate Bolofsky-killer, Stark says, will be the thousands of handheld Symbol Technologies computers the city is giving agents (only a fraction of tickets these days are issued by police officers) to replace old-fashioned citation books. Equipped with a bar-code reader to scan New York registration stickers and synchronized with an atomic clock in Colorado, the devices make it almost impossible for an agent to make the kinds of errors Bolofsky depends on for appeals. Later units will have Global Positioning System chips to eliminate the common mistake--caught by software on Bolofsky's site--of failing to match the street address to a written description of where a car was parked.

Bolofsky shrugs. For one thing, he's hedged his bets by recruiting customers in Washington, D.C. and San Francisco, businesses he can expand if he ever has to abandon NYC. For another, he's been through the City Hall shuffle before. While an accountant at Carnegie Hall in the early 1980s, he grew infuriated at the difficulty of figuring out the city's alternate-side-of-the-street parking rules. There was a profusion of exceptions, including religious holidays like Ash Wednesday and the Solemnity of the Ascension, but nobody, including ticket agents, seemed to know them all. Starting in 1983 Bolofsky sold as many as 20,000 calendars a year at \$6.95, promoting them with an instinctive hucksterism that included a contest for the worst parking-ticket nightmare of the year. One of his best customers was the union representing ticket agents, which bought 2,000 or so calendars a year.

The city finally killed Bolofsky's franchise in the early 1990s by issuing its own calendar, free of charge. But by then Bolofsky had moved on. First he began selling a \$1.50 printed guide to beating parking tickets called the *Z System*. Then in 1993 he launched a software program he called Alarm. Despite the fact that "half the businesses didn't have computers yet," he sold 100 programs his first year. One mistake: He listened to a friend and priced a one-year license at \$295 on the assumption he would make money on renewals, when he could have probably charged more.

Today's [Web site](#) is a refinement of Alarm. For half the price of a ticket, paid up front, users are prompted to look for the most likely ways to get a ticket dismissed. The program even spits out court-ready forms if, for example, a customer claims a medical emergency. Bolofsky refunds the money if the ticket isn't dismissed; there have been some complaints by customers who realize too late they have to pay the ticket, in addition to Bolofsky's fee, while an appeal is being heard.

Bolofsky plans to spend \$500,000 this year promoting his site. For all that, he still gets the bulk of his money from businesses in New York, some of which (especially TV stations and delivery firms) get thousands of tickets a year. Bolofsky claims a dismissal rate of 75% among the tickets that are challenged under his supervision. Martha Stark says that 40% of all appealed tickets are spiked; 30% are reduced.

Will Bolofsky survive the Bloomberg administration's reforms? An admitted monomaniac on the subject of parking tickets, he races through calculations. "I've got ten years to change the system--my kids are 6 and 10," he says. "In ten years they'll be driving, so there's no better time than now."

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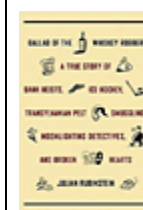
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