



Give 'Em a Blake

Blake Mycoskie, founder of eco-friendly driving school, answers Grist's questions

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INTERACTIVIST Q&A with environmental foot soldiers



Blake Mycoskie.

What's your job title? I'm cofounder and chair of Drivers Ed Direct.

How does your work relate to the environment? We teach kids to drive in hybrids, which makes them more comfortable with the technology and educates them about environmental responsibility. We believe this makes them more likely to buy a hybrid vehicle and have a heightened awareness of environmental issues. Also, we have loaded our online course with numerous green tips and statistics. Here's an example: "The California Department of Transportation's annual litter cleanup costs run over \$40 million. Some practical tips on how to prevent littering include: using a litterbag in your car, tying down loads in your truck bed, and keeping your vehicle -- especially the truck bed -- clean and free of debris that can fly out."

What are you working on at the moment? We are using a series of mall kiosks to inform students and their parents about our online program and our driver training program using hybrid cars.

How do you get to work? I live very close to work so I mostly skateboard or bike. I used to own a hybrid car but donated it to the company.

Where were you born? Where do you live now? Texas. Venice, Calif.

What has been the worst moment in your professional life to date? When my reality TV network was squashed by FOX and Rupert Murdoch.

What's been the best? Seeing the transformation we have made in the drivers' ed industry in just over one year. We have introduced a revolutionary product and business model, and the consumers have responded by using our services and, most importantly, telling their friends how great their experience was with our company.

What environmental offense has infuriated you the most? It makes me very angry to hear that all of the cruise liners are able to dump their waste in international waters.

Who is your environmental hero? One of my heroes is Jean-Michel Cousteau, who has dedicated his life to the research and cleanup of the ocean for future generations.

What's your environmental vice? When I go out of town, I sometimes forget to turn off the A/C in my house.

How do you spend your free time? Fly-fishing, yoga, golf, and spending as much time with family as I can.

What's your favorite meal? Seafood risotto.

Which stereotype about environmentalists most fits you? I am an avid recycler -- I have three recycle bins at my house that are always full.

What's your favorite place or ecosystem? The rainforest in Brazil. I went there when I was on CBS's The Amazing Race TV show.

If you could institute by fiat one environmental reform, what would it be? I would like to see the importance of recycling taught in our schools.

Who was your favorite musical artist when you were 18? How about now? Poison. Now it is U2.

What's your favorite TV show? The O.C.

Movie? Dead Poets Society.

Which actor would play you in the story of your life? Matthew McConaughey.

If you could have every InterActivist reader do one thing, what would it be? Tell your friends about Drivers Ed Direct, and buy a hybrid or other environmentally friendly car.

How does one enroll in your driving school? And where is it located? -- Kevin Hopps, Valley Village, Calif.

You can enroll in our driving school by simply logging on to the Drivers Ed Direct website or calling us toll-free at 1.800.728.1048. We provide DMV-approved online drivers' ed courses for the states of California, Florida, Nevada, and Texas, and in-vehicle training with our fleet of Toyota Priuses and Ford Escape Hybrid SUVs throughout the greater Los Angeles area. Our headquarters are located in the San Fernando Valley of Southern California.

How many kids have you taught to drive? Do you feel like students and families who are drawn to your program are already aware of environmental issues (preaching to the choir), or do they learn from your program? -- Name not provided

Since our company's launch in June of 2005, we've had close to 10,000 teens take our online programs, and we've taught close to 3,000 hours of behind-the-wheel instruction in our hybrid cars. As a whole, I think teenagers love technology, and hybrids are very technologically advanced cars. From the push-button ignition of our Toyota Priuses to the energy consumption screen and the GPS navigation systems in all our vehicles, our students are amazed with the cars. Their experience with Drivers Ed Direct shows them that hybrid cars are cool and not something to be afraid of. Plus, the majority of our customers have never been in a hybrid, so it's a real treat for us to see how our students react the first time they realize the car is actually on and ready to drive even though the engine doesn't appear to be running. As the word spreads throughout the environmental community, more customers are seeking us out every day due to their personal environmental convictions.

I was wondering how to drive to get the best gas mileage. For example, is it better to use air-conditioning when driving on the highway, or to put the windows down? Also, is there an optimal speed to drive? -- Becca Jones, Berkeley, Calif.

Using air-conditioning really only makes a marginal difference on gas mileage. The best advice I can give for all types of vehicles is to always make a smooth transition from a stopped position to accelerating. Unless you encounter an emergency situation, always gradually depress the gas pedal when you want to begin accelerating. Using this method will definitely help to increase your vehicle's gas mileage. Keep slight, constant pressure on the gas pedal once you have reached your desired speed, and avoid making changes in your speed if it's unnecessary. Making fast starts and stops increases your risk of accidents and significantly reduces your gas mileage. Other steps we recommend in our course to increase gas mileage include having properly inflated tires, carrying lighter loads in cars and trucks, and trying to reduce driving during congested traffic periods. As far as the optimal speed to drive ... I'd have to say the posted speed limit.

Do you speak with kids (and others) about slower speeds equaling better fuel savings, and also about how the likelihood that a crash is fatal increases geometrically with the miles per hour? -- Jennifer Stanley, Oakland, Calif.

I'd first like to point out that at Drivers Ed Direct, we've found that teens feel more comfortable and will ultimately learn and digest more information when taught by patient and relaxed instructors as opposed to the traditional method of drivers' training with an iron fist. While we do orient our customers with hybrids and the importance of being environmentally conscientious, our primary goal when instructing is to provide a comprehensive course with emphasis on safe and responsible driving techniques. Drivers Ed Direct also has been very involved with kids through customized speaking engagements with local high schools and other community groups to discuss the importance of safe driving practices and helping the environment, and yes, we get very detailed in our course with concepts related to the physics of driving, such as factors determining force of impact -- impact distance, vehicle speed, and the weight of the vehicle.

Do you have some sort of franchising opportunity? I would like to start a DED in my town. -- Tim Larson, Sonoma County, Calif.

At this time we are not "officially" offering a franchise opportunity, but we are looking to grow rapidly throughout California and would be open to discussions. In the meantime, we have just launched an affiliate program that provides like-minded website developers and other driving-school partners the opportunity to promote our various environmentally friendly driving-school products and services. You can get more info about this program by contacting Jimmy Leach at jimmy@driverseddirect.com.

I drive a car that runs on waste vegetable oil I get for free from restaurants -- how does this method stack up against hybrid cars? And in your opinion, are "veggie burners" a transitional green vehicle or one we'll most likely see more of in the future? -- Lennie Bryan, Little Rock, Ark.

I believe that we must be very conscientious with freeing ourselves of our country's dependence on gasoline vehicles and of the toxic pollutants emitted into our air. Through the use of gas-electric hybrid technology, ethanol and flex-fuel vehicles, vegetable oil and biodiesel "veggie burners" like you mentioned, we are definitely moving in the right direction. Although the long-term best-case scenario of hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles may be decades away, these other types of friendly fuel options are a wonderful alternative to gasoline-only vehicles.

Have you considered lobbying the Amazing Race producers to reduce their energy use, or at least buy carbon offsets for all that driving and flying around the globe they do? -- Name not provided

I wish I could tell the producers what to do, but I do not even think the network heads have that power.

You mentioned a reality TV network in your first set of answers -- can you tell us more about that? -- Grist editors

Yes, after being on the Amazing Race, I teamed up with the founder of the E! channel and the founder of USA Network to launch an all-reality cable channel. After two years of fighting the big boys at FOX, we finally threw in the towel.

I heard you also have a shoe company that helps people in poor countries -- true? And what else have you got up your sleeve? -- Name not provided

Yes, more information is available on the TOMS website. My goal is to be involved in businesses that are profitable and have a strong social or environmental message behind them. Speaking of which, my partners at Drivers Ed Direct were the innovators of the online driver-safety industry with their launch of TrafficSchool.com in 1994.

How do you feel about population growth and energy use? As long as population soars, global warming, destruction of the rainforests, and consumption of natural resources will continue. How many kids do you have or plan on having? -- Daniel Barker, Lakeland, Fla.

Population growth, global warming, and energy use are major issues that our generation must deal with now to protect the generations of tomorrow. I would like to have two to three kids someday, so I have a vested interest in wanting to do my part to ensure they grow up in a safe and healthy world.

Do you have a girlfriend? -- Nicole Runde, Elburn, Ill. No, I am currently single ...