

Marketing the Bus: Can travel-time activity be its USP?

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For almost 15 years there has been an explicit policy focus on increasing bus patronage, and yet in this time relatively little real progress has been made to this end at the national level. Many of our urban centres remain disruptively congested at peak times, and the majority of travellers have remained unmoved in the face of efforts to encourage them to choose the bus for some trips. So what can be done? What options are left to operators and policymakers to make the case for greater bus use to the general population?

Researchers at the Centre for Transport and Society in Bristol have spent the past three years exploring this problem from the unique angle of passengers' day-to-day experiences of the time they spend in the vehicle. The bus journey provides one thing that the car journey cannot: the freedom to do things; things which this new research demonstrates can sometimes be valuable and desirable to passengers. Importantly, this can make the opportunity for "travel-time activity" on the bus a unique and positive opportunity, opposed to the otherwise boring chore of the traffic jam.

Passengers enjoy their time on the bus for a number of reasons, in particular for 'time-out' before or after work, as personal time for relaxing or completing tasks, and for socialising. Despite its often dull connotations in the UK, the bus is quite an active place, with people reading, chatting, texting, making phone calls, listening to music, browsing the internet, sending emails, snoozing, and simply daydreaming. New mobile technologies are being put to use by a fast-growing proportion of passengers, particularly the young, who are using their time to get online and engage in social media and networking through hugely popular sites such as Facebook and Twitter. These technologies mark a distinct change in the opportunity the bus provides for activity, and open up a wealth of activities which five years ago simply would not have been possible on-the-move. There is evidence that many operators are beginning to understand and embrace this change, and there is an opportunity within this to market the bus from the perspective not of the time it takes, but rather the *time it provides*.

However, as expected the findings from the study show that there are negative sides to the experience too, and the quintessential issues with bus travel are still reported by passengers: poor punctuality and reliability; inconvenient routes or an outright lack of service; and uncomfortable or restrictive vehicle design are all create a distinctly negative perception which the opportunity for travel-time activity is unable to mitigate. After all, the bus is first and foremost a service, and one which the majority of its passengers are heavily reliant upon.

The message is clear however, that once these more fundamental service expectations are well met, there is a distinct and unique opportunity for operators and policymakers to tap into higher levels of the bus experience, and seek to market the bus from the novel angle of travel-time use. There is much work to be done on changing the cultural image of bus travel, and improving the experience for passengers; however it is useful to understand the ways in which the bus can be – at times – a desirable place to be.