
JOHN CARTLEDGE

*Assistant Secretary
London Regional Passengers Committee*

Bus information : what do passengers want?

*London Regional Passengers Committee
Clements House
14-18 Gresham Street
London EC2V 7PR
Britain*

*Tel : +44 171 505 9000
Fax : +44 171 505 9003*

BUS INFORMATION : WHAT DO PASSENGERS WANT?

Paper presented to UITP seminar on “What can technology do for passenger information?” (Gothenburg, 17/18 June 1996)

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen :

1. May I begin by conveying the appreciation of my Committee for the honour bestowed upon us by the International Union of Public Transport's invitation to contribute to the proceedings of this conference? As the official representative body for the users of London's bus and rail systems, we make no pretence of being transport planners, operators, economists or engineers - and even less of being information designers or technologists. As lay men and women, chosen simply as a cross-section of the travelling public, the only expertise to which we can lay claim is that of being expert passengers - the daily consumers of your product, the beneficiaries of your successes and the victims of your failures. But since we passengers are, or should be, the purpose of your business rather than an obstacle to your work, it is proper that our voice should occasionally find some expression in debates about the future of the public transport system. We are deeply indebted to the UITP for its generosity in providing us with a place on its platform today.
2. In a speech addressing the British bus industry's trade association last year, the then Secretary of State for Transport called, inter alia, *“for the bus industry to explore new services for passengers as part of the industry's drive to bring them new benefits.”* Amongst these, he asserted, *“passenger information can always be improved, not just to your own passengers but between other services as well. This need not involve lots of expensive new technology, exciting and promising though this can be. Better timetables, simple fact sheets and leaflets can effectively supplement high tech.”*
3. You may think it odd that a member of the Government should have to make such an obvious point to the assembled captains of a major service industry. It is hard to imagine his colleagues lecturing (say) the insurance or entertainment industries about the need to promote their products. Yet the ground onto which he was venturing has been well worn. Even the most ardent advocates of competition and privatisation have freely admitted the bus industry's shortcomings in this sphere.
4. Take Professor John Hibbs, the eminence grise behind the change in the law which deregulated Britain's buses in 1985. Speaking at a seminar on *The Bus in a New Era : The Marketing Challenge*, he observed *“... we come to promotion and my heart fails me! The image of the bus is poor, the availability of information has been suicidally neglected, and of innovation there has been little or none ... There is additional turnover to be gained from potential customers waiting to find out*

where the buses run, and when, and at what price ... It's no good expecting someone else to tell them."

5. A working party of the Chartered Institute of Transport (the professional body for the industry's senior managers) came to similar conclusions. In *Bus Routes to Success* it noted that *"There is good evidence that potential bus users are put off by the uncertainty of when and where buses will run. As a result, operators tend to be competing for a diminishing pool of regular passengers - those who can be reasonably sure what services to expect. Hence, if more people are to be attracted back onto buses, they need to have a convenient way of finding out what services are available. Because operators are competing, the standard sources of information (for example, notices at stops and bus stations) are often piecemeal and unreliable."*
6. Almost exactly the same point emerged from research carried out for the National Consumer Council. *"Competition has often effectively deprived passengers of ready access to reliable, up-to-date information about services. Even where there have been extra journey possibilities as a result of a number of operators running services along the same routes, passengers have been unable to exercise any real choice because of the difficulty of finding out what is available. The fall in ridership in many areas suggests that the confusion, inconvenience and annoyance created by all this has undermined passenger confidence in travel by bus."*
7. And it is not only by the authors of academic studies that these shortcomings have been observed. When the bus industry's trade paper polled company managers for their views on the subject, 78% acknowledged that the provision of information to customers by the industry in general needed improvement, though ironically only 29% admitted to the same deficiency on the part of the company for which they worked!
8. All these commentators have been making similar points. Bus operators, it seems, have too often been content to take their clientèle for granted. Knowledge of routes, times, fares and tickets is handed down from generation to generation like folklore - and with much the same degree of factual precision. Telephone enquiries are unanswered out of office hours. The non-availability of maps and timetables from such seemingly obvious outlets as news kiosks or post offices suggests that they are regarded as state secrets. And the serried ranks of information-free bus stops at Britain's roadsides have all the commercial pulling-power of a supermarket stocked exclusively with unmarked unpriced cans. In the era of the information superhighway, much of the bus industry, it would appear, has barely learned to crawl.
9. Manufacturers of toothpaste spend, I am told, a fifth or more of their turnover on promoting their product, because experience has taught them that failure to do so leads inexorably to a loss of market share. Yet the bus industry, which has been losing market share for nearly half a century, appears reconciled to the prospect of

continuing decline. One of the more uncharacteristically outgoing and publicity-conscious companies in the business informs us in its annual Customer Report that for every £1 ticket sold, precisely 2 pence goes on marketing - a term which covers much more than simply the dissemination of service information. If a company renowned amongst its peers for the twice-yearly door-to-door distribution of a comprehensive guide giving full particulars of all routes and times for all operators in the area can do so at a cost of less than 2% of its income, one is driven to the conclusion that most operators' outlay must be miniscule in the extreme.

10. What I am seeking to highlight is a truism which ought in any case to be self-evident, and one which I was pleased to find echoed in paragraph 46 of the European Commission's green paper on The Citizens' Network. If prospective passengers are to be enabled to make full and effective use of the public transport network, it is imperative that both before and during a journey they should have easy access to all the information they require, at each stage of the trip, in a user-friendly and dependable format, to ensure that they can reach their travel objectives in a stress-free and agreeable manner. Details of stops, routes, times, fares, tickets and connections must be presented as widely and intelligibly as possible, and in ways designed to engage the interest and win the custom not only of those who have no other choice of travel mode but also of those in whose lives bus travel currently plays no part. A glance at the official statistics is all that is needed to remind us not only that the bus and coach industry's share of total passenger kilometres has fallen from a modest 9% to a meagre 6% in the past decade, and that actual number of local bus trips has dropped by 22%, but also that 38% of the population no longer travels by this mode at all.
11. It is a basic tenet of classical economic theory that a market can only function with maximum efficiency if buyers have "perfect knowledge" of the range of alternative goods and services on offer. But whilst it is clearly in the interest of individual suppliers to promote awareness of their own products, it is not in their interest to promote awareness of alternative (and possibly competitive) products from other sources. Indeed, it may even be in their interest to promote misinformation about their rivals' activities. And buses are not like cans of soup - a prospective purchaser can browse along the shelf studying the tins, but he or she cannot be sure of discovering the journey opportunities available simply by standing at the roadside. So the provision of information in forms appropriate to the various locations in which it is likely to be needed, and intelligible to its intended audience, is a fundamental prerequisite for maintaining and increasing demand for bus travel - or, to express it in more vernacular terms, for getting bums onto seats.
12. In a recent situation comedy series, the ubiquitous television star Joanna Lumley played an aristocratic heiress who had turned to crime as a means of restoring the family's lost fortune. In one episode, finding herself without funds for a taxi fare, she insisted on walking home half-way across town, rejecting all entreaties from her footsore companion to go by bus. In response to his insistent demand for an explanation of this apparently irrational conduct, she finally hissed "*I don't understand buses.*" The scriptwriters who composed that gag clearly expected

viewers to recognise the implication that the bus is far too down-market (or, as I would prefer to see it, too egalitarian and democratic) a mode of transport to be familiar to a rich bitch of the kind Miss Lumley habitually portrays. But there is another, equally serious implication in the line - that somehow bus travel requires specialist knowledge and that this is not easily acquired. Understanding the concept of what buses are for may not be unduly intellectually taxing, but figuring out how to make good use of them can be a brain-teaser, and a significant deterrent to winning extra ridership. If this is so, then it is a state of affairs which the industry will neglect at its peril.

13. It was with this proposition in mind that when what is now the Confederation of Passenger Transport launched its “Buses Mean Business” campaign some years ago, information provision was one of the eight topic areas in which it was proposed that demonstration schemes should be launched (hopefully with some grant aid from national or local government funds) to illustrate the scope for improvements countrywide. The campaign was successful in persuading the Government to set up a working group, headed by the Minister for Public Transport, with the express purpose of considering what could be done, in partnership with bus operators and local authorities, to assist the industry to staunch the continuing loss of passengers and to play a larger part in overcoming the problems posed by the relentless increase in road traffic. One outcome of this group’s deliberations was the decision to commission a study from the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) to assess passengers’ evaluation of different types of information, to identify gaps in current provision, to find examples of good practice, and to quantify the extent to which lack of information inhibited use.
14. At roughly the same time, in London (where we have so far been spared the excitements and the turmoil of deregulation visited upon the industry elsewhere), London Transport’s bus operating subsidiary was initiating a major review of its own information strategy, including some detailed research into users’ priorities and preferences. Both the TRL and the LT studies were mounted on a substantially larger and more wide-ranging scale than any similar work which had preceded them, and both have produced rich seams of evidence that will provide practitioners in this field with abundant material to quarry. All I can do now is to highlight a few of their more significant findings.
15. Starting with the LT study, this confirmed in its initial phases that respondents generally had only a very partial knowledge of bus routes, and lacked a thorough understanding of fares and ticket systems (particularly irregular and potential users). There was a general absence of any real journey planning by many users who tended to rely on guessing routes rather than having a confident knowledge of those actually offered. For most users, past experience was more important than use of any current information source, and lack of even the most basic information at stops, through vandalism and apparent neglect, made the discussion of newer ideas difficult.

16. The study then went on to attempt some segmentation of the market, by asking respondents to undertake unfamiliar bus journeys and investigating their actual information needs throughout - at point of origin, while waiting, when travelling on board, and after alighting. This work led to a tripartite classification of information users as either “phobics”, “lovers” or “pragmatists”. Phobics are those who are actively averse to using maps and timetables, believe themselves incapable of comprehending them, and rely almost exclusively on verbally-transmitted knowledge. Lovers are those who relish the challenge of cracking a puzzle, always seek out printed information in advance, and value precision. Pragmatists are the key target group for information providers, because although they do not positively enjoy using such materials, they do not actively avoid them either, and they can be induced to use them if their need is sufficient.
17. Much time and effort was devoted to researching variations in map and timetable formats, and the relative utility of different components in local service guides, to enhance their appeal to pragmatists, before attention reverted to the phobics to discover what types of information (if any) they could be induced to use. The telephone enquiry service was generally well received, especially if it became a freefone information helpline, as were staffed information kiosks, dot matrix indicators at stops, and the naming of bus stop flags (which, curiously, has never been done in London hitherto). There was also a generally positive response, albeit less overwhelmingly so, to public address announcements and route diagrams on board, and to fares displays at stops.
18. Further phases of this work focused on roadside displays (including bus stop flag designs, direction-of-travel indicators, and information posters on shelters), on the content and format of destination and route number blinds on buses, on the special needs of visually-handicapped users, and on the adequacy of information about the all-night bus network. The last of these topics took the researchers into hitherto unexplored fields, including the challenge of communicating effectively with potential users who are in a state of alcoholic stupefaction.
19. Turning to the study commissioned from the TRL by the Government, this was initiated during 1993 and its findings have not yet been generally released. Since I am pre-empting the formal announcement of the outcome of this work, I should enter a caveat that what follows is my own synopsis and does not carry any official imprimatur.
20. The study was in two main phases. The first was concerned with the provision and use of information at present, and with both regular and occasional users’ perceptions of it. The second phase made use of these findings to develop and then to test a number of possible improvements. The work involved several hundred interviews carried out in four contrasting localities which varied both in their degree of urbanisation, the scale of competitive activity on the road, and the current extent of information provided. Interestingly, however, responses to most questions differed very little between one area and another.

21. In terms of the relative importance of different service attributes, frequency and reliability were overwhelmingly regarded as of prime importance, followed at some distance by fares and then by information (*see chart A*) - so the best possible information will never compensate for a poor service, and it is on the quality of the product itself, not its promotion, that the industry will be judged in the market place. But, that said, information can make a difference at the margin, and it is this marginal traffic that may determine the viability of a service. In the absence of the necessary information, only a quarter of those interviewed would still have attempted to make the trip by bus (*see chart B*) - so information does matter.
22. As is to be expected, passengers making regular trips had few - if any - unmet needs for information, since they were familiar with the services on which they travelled (*see chart C*). But when the same question was put in relation to new or unfamiliar journeys a whole range of requirements was revealed, headed by departure time, route number, boarding point, alighting point, service frequency, and fare for the journey (*see chart D*). There was a surprisingly low awareness of the various information media or sources actually available, and it was not clear whether this was primarily a function of a low perceived requirement for such facilities or of the failure of those providing them to advertise them adequately. Printed timetables at home and at the stop were easily the preferred source of information, with low reliance on enquiry services (whether by phone or in person at enquiry offices), and even less on asking acquaintances or fellow travellers (*see chart E*). Most respondents who had sought information had acquired it from bus stations or enquiry offices, although they would have preferred to have done so at home, at the bus stop or on the bus (half claiming that there was none available at their local stops).
23. In the second phase of the TRL study, comprehension tests were devised to assess users' competence in extracting information from actual examples of current timetable publications. Few admitted to any difficulties in comprehending printed media, or to have been misled by them, but the actual results confirmed much previous work which has revealed disconcertingly high error rates (which may in turn have fuelled false perceptions of unreliability), and some noticeable variations in performance, particularly by age. Younger participants quickly became impatient and gave up if the solution was not immediately obvious, while more elderly subjects were prone to persevere but ultimately to reach wrong answers. The irony of this is that these groups are also those who are the most regular bus users. This echoes the finding of the LT study that women and people on low incomes (disproportionately well represented in bus queues) are more likely to be information phobics, whereas the information lovers were more often high-income males, seldom to be seen on buses.
24. In the same phase, respondents were given units ("shadow money") to allocate between alternative information media, which were "priced" to reflect varying costs of provision. Timetables at stops, timetable books at home and posters in town centres scored highly, with lesser support for telephone enquiry services and much lower support for either electronic displays or computer terminals (which

were much more highly priced). High-tech applications, it appears, may be valued as additions to familiar low-tech media, but not in preference to them.

25. The findings of both of these studies have been considered by the Government's working group on buses, already mentioned, on which representatives of operators, local authorities and users meet under the chairmanship of the Minister. The conclusions and recommendations arising from the latest round of this body's deliberations were announced earlier this year and included a passage which read :

“Good passenger information and marketing play a vital part in making bus services a more attractive travel option, increasing patronage, and encouraging people to make more use of buses in preference to their cars. Operators and local authorities both have a role in providing and disseminating passenger information. Joint co-operation and cost sharing in such activity is important if an effective information and marketing strategy is to be developed to the benefit of all.

“To help those concerned with planning and providing passenger information the group has produced the first draft of a Guide to Good Practice. This will be worked up with the aim of publishing it by the middle of 1996. The group will also be considering whether to commission the production of a manual giving guidance and case study material on the provision of passenger information and promotion of public transport and the benefits and costs involved.”

26. It seems that in words, at least, the importance of passenger information has at last been grasped at the highest level. The acid test, of course, will be whether these proclamations are now matched by deeds. We passengers, you can be sure, will be watching closely for evidence that the industry has truly taken this message to heart, and has abandoned the bad habits of the past in favour of an information-rich tomorrow.





