

Popularity through branding and design

Public transport is a public service that needs to make a good impression on its customers. Every time is the first time for some first-time user, while an impression on daily users should be made every single day. User-centric brand thinking and brand management provides an excellent tool for the comprehensive fine-tuning of public transport service.

One of the elements in adopting a customer service attitude is making every effort to provide unrivalled service day in and day out at all interfaces where the customer comes into contact with the service. User-centric brand thinking and brand management provides an excellent tool for the comprehensive fine-tuning of public transport service. A good first impression is easily made when the core offering is in order.

A brand is the perception of a product or service arising from the user's comprehensive experience. Brands are divided into product brands, like Adidas, Pepsi or Nokia, and service brands. The latter term refers to an accumulation of perceptions arising from a service such as public transport, which is multi-dimensional and often also a public service. Managed service brand building differs from product brand building in that instead of expressing organisational vision, the emphasis is squarely on users and their needs and values.

Brands may sometimes be understood in quite a superficial manner. In the corporate world, brands may nonetheless play a key role in comprehensively communicating the values of the operator or company to help customers with their choices and actions. A well-managed brand thus also constitutes a significant competitive factor.

A monetary value can also be calculated for product brands but many immeasurable factors play a role in the arising and creation of a brand. Elements impacting on the formulation of brand, i.e. product perception, include:

- the actual product or service, the core offering
- location and operating environment
- communication and advertising
- users, demographics
- market position
- price
- way of operating.

Several parallel operators pose a challenge to system clarity

One of the challenges in public transport brand building lies in the parallel or overlapping visibility of several different public transport operators in the public transport milieu. From the passenger perspective, different operators with their different messages easily give rise to visual and functional incoherence in the operating environment. Passengers may little care which organisation or company provides the public

transport service – at least as long as everything works well. Public transport use can more easily be adopted as a regular habit when the various elements of the public transport operating system send consistent and cohesive messages. The requirement of consistent and cohesive service applies particularly in respect of foreign passengers, passengers with mobility or functional impairment and passengers who seldom use public transport.

It should indeed be possible to build a consistently manifested service brand in the area perceived as continuous by passengers regardless of organisational, municipal or operator boundaries. A good brand traditionally communicates the values of a single organisation or company and thus strengthens its business. The challenge of a common service brand lies in increasing the profitability of several different operators without weakening the standing of any.

Quality is based on the totality of the user experience

Passenger perception of public transport has been the subject of much research in recent years in Finland. These projects have sought to develop questionnaire-based passenger surveys along with measurement and analysis methods to determine the relative importance of quality factors. The relative valuation of individual quality factors represents a challenging task – perceived quality is based on the totality of the user experience, which may be influenced by myriad other factors occurring at the same time, not just the quantities measured but also emotion, memory or association. The perceived quality of public transport is almost always the sum total of distinct synergistic impressions where earlier experiences also play a role.

Thanks to the numerous product brands and the advertising arms race, the modern consumer has learned to monitor the images of products and services perhaps even more closely than their prices. The potential or actual user of public transport is a consumer of travelling services whose choices may quite extensively be influenced through brand building. Since perceptions are often just as abstract as the word implies, the user, when asked, may find it difficult to even itemise the occasionally infinitesimal elements that give rise to the perception.

Transportation engineering planning in public transport is traditionally based on both measurable factors and factors that can be anticipated with a fair degree of certainty. User-driven planning requires acceptance of the fact that not all elements of the calculations

can be established in advance to provide an optimal cost-benefit ratio. Instead, the planners need to trust that the coherent communication of user-driven values and visions will create a user-friendly operating environment of high quality.

Tools for public transport brand building through research

Product perceptions, i.e. brands, always arise regardless of whether they are planned. Brand Development Tool for Urban Public Transport, the research project headed by this author, presents the design process for a brand suitable for the public transport sector. A focal goal of the project has been to systematically take advantage of the best aspects of public transport services. The brand tool adapted for use in Finland's urban regions is a three-stage process that may be utilised to systematically introduce user-focus as the key factor in modifying the operating environment and service of public transport. (BKT 2006)

An urban public transport operator may choose the scope of implementation of the three-stage process to meet development needs. Whatever the scope, the consecutive stages facilitate the honing and internalisation of values and vision on the one hand and their concretisation on the basis of user data obtained on the other.

The first stage of the three-stage process consists of a status quo analysis of the relevant city's public transport brand. Media analysis was one of the methods available for this purpose that was utilised in the brand development study. Media analyses of the operators included in the study revealed e.g. the overall approach of Helsinki City Transport HKL, which highlights proximity and access, and its focus on vehicles, as well as the more polished style of Helsinki Metropolitan Area Council YTV and its manner of communications, which tends to focus on the offering of the entire transport system.

The second stage of the process presented in the brand study involves the collection of user data, i.e. determination of the needs and desires of passengers. Suitable methods include travel diaries and the image method. User data is most naturally acquired in light of and in comparison to the vision embraced at the first stage. It is essential that goals and hopes are discussed and communicated at this point also through illustrations, in a concrete manner. The role of the transport operator at this stage is to ask questions, listen and take note, let the descriptions of travel experiences flow freely – and then pick up on emphases and recurring

1D

**factors
identifiable at
first glance**

colour
material
texture
surface
odours

2D

**printed
material and
emblematic
symbolism**

shape
pattern
graphics
outline
logo

3D

**physical world:
equipment and
tools**

3-dimensional
shape
function
service content
ergonomics
touch

4D

**values communi-
cated to users**

mission
tradition
philosophy

spiritual
cultural
emotional

themes, group wishes and issues, make comparisons against the vision and contemplate values.

During the third stage, the user data obtained is put to use, whether in procurement of a new information system, competitive tendering of new fleet vehicles or design of a new public transport logo. These examples are also constituent elements of the brand and the principle of user-focus must permeate the operating environment as extensively as possible. The user data obtained at the previous stage may be informally reviewed in planning as initial data. User-focus in turn may be tested by e.g. putting together imaginary travel experiences or scenarios. (BKT 2006)

Design, user experience, and values

Design means modifying the user experience to comply with values. Brand building methods which can be used to concretise values in a comprehensible manner have been applied in a public transport context in the study. Values should be visible to passengers in the form of a clear, consistent and attractive service brand.

Design is often perceived as a function that puts an extra, aesthetic frosting on a functioning product or service entity. Nevertheless, the design process should be incorporated into the planning process of functions and products. According to Peter McGrory, design is realised in the manner in which the values in keeping with vision objectives are cascaded down into the customer-driven development of usability and the travel experience. In the public transport environment, the

customer is literally in the middle of a service and operating environment constructed by the public transport operator. (McGrory 2006)

The vision of the operator must be realised in a consistent and managed manner throughout the operating environment. The key to user-centric planning is obtaining image data from passengers. This data together with cultural data is utilised in the planning of operations, service and the product concept. User data, cultural data and operator vision must be skilfully integrated so that:

- passengers perceive the service environment as enjoyable with all senses
- the environment can easily be used by all kinds of passengers
- the environment exhibits convincing quality.

The user experience needs to be modified at many levels while in terms of quality, the deciding factor is a positive overall experience of public transport and its service brand. McGrory compares the structure of a brand to an onion:

The thing first observed about a brand is the surface (1D), which gives the first impression of the essence of the product or service. With an onion, we would obtain a sensual impression of its freshness, taste and smell. The comparable qualities in the public transport brand would include modernity, recognisability and odours. After the first impressions come actual operations and the operating environment inclusive of user interfaces (2D and 3D). The overall perception of the service is further influenced by the fourth platform (4D), which communicates the values and philosophy behind operations and serves as a link between the past, present and future.

Like the onion, the first impression of public transport comes from the physical contact surface – sensation, user experience. Advertising, communications and all graphic design play key roles as differentiating factors close to the surface. The third element to be experienced by the customer is ease of use, efficiency and enjoyability of travel. The fourth factors to impact on the overall experience and continued use of the service are abstract values. The combined effects of all the aforementioned factors give rise to the brand, i.e. the perception of the product or service.

An integrated brand approach reassembles the elements of the public transport system. A rethinking of priorities will be necessary in future R&D efforts. The passenger perspective must be made a more focal part of the transport planning process.

In transport system planning, the planning of the network, routes, timetables and costs involves the construction and optimisation of a complex functional system where user needs, at the level of statistical data, serve as a natural point of departure. The time has come to introduce managed service brand building as a parallel process in the planning system. This would allow us to comprehend and steer in the desired direction the sometimes surprising behaviour of consumers and intuitions of passengers. The intermeshing and parallel nature of the processes should be emphasised: even the best advertising campaigns after the fact cannot make up for shortcomings in real-life service. ■

The goal in creating a brand identity is not just surface consistency but inner coherence. –Aubrey Balkind, CEO, Frankfurt Balkind.

Brand building today does not mean communicating features or building personality, but participating in the customer's life, being of service and assistance. (Raulas 2006)

Sources

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