

Public Transport: Britain's Best Kept Secret?

NOT IN LEICESTER, IT ISN'T.

Doug Rose is the first to confess that he is not exactly impartial when it comes to banging the drum for basic good quality information at bus stops (and elsewhere). He has worked in this industry for over 40 years and is still bewildered by the lack of understanding and importance operators and authorities afford it. Recent exchanges in Buses have caused him to get his pen out.

Reading of my good friend Andrew Braddock's recent experience in Manchester, reminded me of a similar one in Leeds a few years ago. Racks and racks of timetables but no local bus map. However, one mercurially was flourished from beneath the counter when I said my company produced one and where were they.

I wonder whether other industries keep their products so well hidden from their customers. I have yet to enter a restaurant and be told "sorry, we're out of menus", or "here's one but the dishes and prices are out-of-date", or "yes, the type is a bit small and hard to read because of amateurish presentation, but it was cheap".

The situation at the bus stop is little better, where it is not surprising to find timetables out-of-date, wrong, missing altogether, covered by fly posting (often by the operators themselves), and hard to read because of poor layouts and colour schemes used with little regard to the context of legibility in the street. The passengers' struggle is further compounded by the use of poorly designed and maintained display cases.

THE SCATTER-GUN DESIGN PROCESS

In my view it all goes wrong right at the beginning. Very few providers of information seem to appreciate that a timetable at a bus stop, a timetable in a leaflet, a bus stop flag, a route map, a bus blind or a website are all part of the information chain and need to be designed from a single thought process as a seamless kit of parts. In reality, these aspects are usually the domain of different people.

Perhaps the roots of this emanate from de-regulation in 1986, though I rather fancy the Act simply made matters worse, as opposed to being the sole cause. Fundamentally, there is no industry standard for street displays, in terms of responsibility or hardware. When the infrastructure spoils were divided up, some operators got responsibility for the bus stops and some went to local authorities. London of course doesn't suffer from this. Here, the kids in the playground have a teacher to keep them from being unruly; outside the capital we seem to think they can fight it out among themselves.

Even the 2000 Act, which empowered authorities to provide basic information if the operator did not, and then reclaim the cost from them, hasn't really worked. There is no chance that a bus operator is going to be told what to do in a commercial world – and why should they. As such we see multiple displays at a single point, with infrastructure and content provided by competing parties. This is not helped by the majority of poster cases in shelters being a carrot from advertising media giants, provided 'free', though inappropriate for the location.

THERE ARE A FEW ENLIGHTENED AUTHORITIES

In 2005 I was asked to help rescue an impending disaster landed on Derby City Council, caused by developers about to demolish their bus station. I designed and implemented products for a totally street-based 'temporary bus station' which was succeeded by a swish new permanent facility in 2010. The key to its success was twofold: the Council's willingness to listen and work closely with me; their willingness to take control of the infrastructure and content, ensuring a single standard. We made the street bus stop information look and feel the same as it would when the bus station would open – just one simple visual language to be learnt by the user. The eventual transfer back from street to bus station meant that passengers still saw the same style of information they had now got used to. Since then, crucially, it has been kept up-to-date. In fairness, we have had similar experiences with local councils in Warrington and Southend.

A classic waste of display case space in a bus shelter. This one is in Southend but sadly it could be almost anywhere else in Britain.



INFORMATION DESIGN BASICS

I am quite clear on the basics required. One can reasonably suppose that passengers know the name of where they are trying to get to. Bus passengers fall into one of three categories:

- 1 Those who know their destination, which bus route and its nearest boarding point;
- 2 Those who know their bus route but not where to board it;
- 3 Those who know their destination, but not which bus to catch, nor where to catch it.

Passengers in the first category need little help. Those in the second need assistance to get them to the most convenient boarding point. Those in the third category will need a lot of help.

Good products, in the right place, have about eight seconds to hold the attention of someone seeking information. If it is perceived that progress is not being made within that time, most people give up. Design and production must address this by genuine understanding of what is required and where – and how to present it. The starting point must be the understanding the context of passengers’ range of needs, but it is usually the source data that starts the process. This amplifies how easy it is to waste money – all that time spent up to the point of delivery, for very few people to understand it.

In issue 676 Nigel Pursell repudiated an earlier claim that at-stop information was unnecessary because people look on websites before setting out. He is right, but there is more to it than he stated. Even if users have a computer and look at websites, they still need reassurance at the bus stop that they have made the right decision and are at the right one. So often, bus stop flags, maps and timetables at stops conflict, so why should the passenger, having checked a website, believe that either?

MAKING SENSE OF LEICESTER

Following the first phase of altering major traffic flows in the city centre, where a section of road was closed with consequential movement of bus stops, criticism came the council’s way because of insufficient clear information about the changeover. Not wanting a repeat, I was asked to advise on the next, more extensive phase.

There are about 80 city centre bus stops and two bus stations. It was immediately apparent that some operators were providing timetables and some were producing none. Most obviously though, there was no wayfinding to help people get to the right stop.



I provided information posters at all stops to help people through phase two of reversing some one-way streets. Having again to work within the straight-jacket of existing inappropriate poster cases, I designed a single poster format for each of the 15 bus stops affected. Each one received a stop-specific timetable, linear route diagram and, where space permitted, a city centre Where to Board (WTB) map.

However, Leicester cried out for a proper WTB scheme but there was no time to create the essential places served index that would actually make it work properly. (There was little point though as the bus stop lettering scheme was failing on several levels.)



A dedicated ‘News’ panel was incorporated at the new stops, and also posted at all others in the city centre to ensure good coverage of information.



Coming to it cold, seen on the roof of a shelter, what does a passenger seeking help make of this? If the association is made that the route numbers to the right relate to the operators in the middle, who operates 73? And when I tested a few people, most thought R2 was a bus route. From the operators’ point of view, they are not succeeding in ‘selling’ their own routes. The mystery of ‘R2’ is compounded by there being no map with which to make any tenuous association.

BUS STOP EK	RUTLAND STREET				
 	47	49	49A	49B	73
	78	84	84A	85	86
	87	88	88A		

I simplified the lettering system and made it clear that ‘EK’ is a bus stop. Route numbers are codes relating to the course the buses each take; bus stop letters are codes for the location and the two should use different nomenclature to remove ambiguity and confusion. Numbers were therefore eliminated from all stop identities. Whether a shelter roof plate (EK, previously R2) or a pole-mounted flag (BF, previously B6) the visual language is the same.

BUS STOP BF	CHURCH GATE			
 	12	18	48	50
	50A	51	70	104
	140	153	158	162



All shelters received a Where to Board map and index, at the left of the poster. A stop-specific linear diagram in the middle has all the operators logos appended to each of their routes more successfully than on a flag, and at eye level; a stop-specific timetable is included to the right.

AND THEN THE WHOLE LOT

The new arrangements were quite complex and included changes to the traffic flows along several roads. This created a number of challenges but having equipped the new stops, with re-designed flags that made the timetables and map make sense of one another, the move went very smoothly for bus passengers.

Having equipped the newly moved stops the council later asked that I look at the whole city centre. They agreed with my proposal to re-letter all stops more logically and so help make a solid link between flags, timetables and map. A WTB index and the enhanced modular designed flag system was introduced.

Every stop now has the 'where next' question answered by this and a stop-specific linear diagram; the timetables give the 'when' answer. It went live on 29th May 2011.



Where no shelters exist, two pole-mounted cases were fitted and the Where to Board adapted to suit. The linear diagram and timetable went in the other case. This stop is alighting only but still has a Where to Board to help passengers on the next phase of their journey.