

# Passenger Information: Science or Nuisance?

**Doug Rose makes some thought-provoking points, based on over 40 years experience in our industry, concentrating on information design and wayfinding.**

Having worked in the industry for many decades, much of what I am about to say may provoke the response 'well he would say that wouldn't he'. And I won't argue against any allegations of 'he has an axe to grind' either. The truth of the matter is I do what I do for a living because I am both interested in it and also because I care and believe in it. Enough of the Billy Graham – I hope you are still there.

I see good quality information as a way of generating travel and remain unflinching in my belief that our industry (and several others) under-estimates to an immeasurable degree the vital importance of it. Fortunately I have come across very few people who think information should not be bothered with at all, so the important question is 'why do we provide it?'

Firstly, there are legal requirements, which I needn't discuss in this forum as readers will be painfully aware of the legislation and its consequences. If it is accepted that information is only provided for one of two reasons – because we have to, or because we want to – then, putting altruism to one side, presumably information providers feel there is something to be gained by doing so. If this is the case, the drive must be to provide it as cost-effectively as possible, but cost-effective solutions can only be created if the needs and desired outcomes are also understood. Critically, usability processes must be understood.

I believe an awful lot of very well-intentioned material produced, fails, simply because user needs are not understood by providers and designers alike. Too much material is produced to supposedly established formulae, without understanding the circumstances (lots of them) in which the products will be used, functionally, from the users' perspective. There are other factors too.

When people make journeys their personal needs for information vary enormously, without understanding this, most solutions fail. Different people will have different requirements depending on individual trips. An expert traveller will tackle an unfamiliar journey very differently from a novice traveller, though their needs are probably similar. Information acquisition is a skill that needs learning and 'expert' travellers start from a higher level than novices through experience already gained. We can also add into the melting pot the wide disparity of human intelligence and cognitive reasoning abilities. Have providers and information designers considered this?

Another facet is that every city, town or village will have its own geography and its own public transport service patterns. A 'one size fits all' approach may satisfy the provider, but often trips up the designer (lulled into the same comfort zone of 'one of those will do') and in turn the end user.

Then it gets difficult. Assuming the provider (client) and the supplier (information designer) both have expert subject knowledge of the facts to be provided, they are actually at a notable disadvantage in being too familiar with the product (buses, trains, etc) to see it from the users' perspective. It can be described as the insider's inability to see the outsider's view.

Bus deregulation has made seamless information provision very difficult as there are differing priorities pulling from

operational competition and the authorities that have control over only some aspects. The ownership and management of the street infrastructure of bus stops and shelters pull too. It's almost a tug-of war with three ends.

There are other barriers to overcome as we all know, some outside our control and some actually caused by us. (When I say 'us', I am referring to providers, in the form of PTEs, councils, operators and designers/suppliers.) To anyone other than a top-level expert, many passenger journeys will require consultation of different sources of facts: internet, journey planners, bus stop flags, timetables, directional signs, maps, bus destination displays, etc. These should not be dismissed, they are all part of the information chain and ignore some of them and it is akin to doing a jig-saw puzzle without the picture and some pieces missing. Sadly, information is very fragmented, with different facets hardly ever coming together as they are routinely produced by different groups of people with different agendas. There is seldom any 'owner' of the complete chain and so no single thought design process.

We could take the attitude that it doesn't matter now as many people lead their lives by being instructed what to do by their various mobile (actually they should be called 'portable') devices. This argument is flawed; there is only so much one can glean this way. In an unfamiliar town, would you wait at a bus stop displaying no route numbers and no places served, and then board a bus with no route number or destination display? Real-time, static and pocket information (all the items listed in the previous paragraph) provide the reassurance that the correct choices have been made and that we are going to continue our journey as planned.

Psychologists and good information designers will tell you that user feedback is an essential part of the process of acquiring knowledge. When an action is taken, all of us need confirmation that what we intended is what is actually going to happen. Poor design is everywhere in our modern lives (I really recommend reading 'The Design of Everyday Things' by Donald A. Norman, it will change your life). When we press a button we should expect an acknowledging light or bleep to confirm that our instruction has been acted upon by the device. When inferring a bus time or stop location from timetables, maps and signs, we equally need confirmation that we are there at the right time and in the right place. Imagine boarding a long-distance train by accident when we wanted the local stopper. Signs and displays are quite important in the decision-making process.

The trouble is that all this is not seen as a science, which it is. Most people can count, but rightly don't regard themselves as mathematicians. Computers allow all manner of material to be produced by almost anyone, but the computer is the tool, and tools don't come with built-in expertise. As information providers we must all recognise the science of communication. The solutions are affordable, they just need recognition and professionalism. Doing this sort of thing knowledgeably, efficiently and effectively, is a benefit – not a cost.