

The Total is Less Than The Sum of the Parts

I see good quality information as a way of generating travel and remain unflinching in my belief that our industry (and several others) simply doesn't get it.

Information is so fragmented with different facets hardly ever coming together, as they are routinely produced by different people with different agendas. The biggest failing though is the inability of the designer/provider to see the results of their efforts through the eyes of the end user.

DEREGULATION FAILINGS

I agreed with almost all of Andrew Braddock's article in 'Buses' (number 679 p48). Autumn 1986 was a very busy time for me as everyone came out of the woodwork needing maps, timetables and publicity – because all of a sudden they were compelled to produce these things. This in itself is very telling.

Ever since, deregulated route networks have been a constant source of problems when trying to portray them. For example, two different routes with the same number – try explaining that on an area map. Some are because of commercial/tendered services, with two operators running it at different times, but with inevitable variation prolixity. We have ticket validity anomalies on the same route because one operator naturally accepts his own ticket offers but another does not. It now becomes important at the bus stop to make this clear; this complicates the information, which in turn makes it more expensive to design and produce.

We also find routes within the same general city catchment,

Look at the front of this bus, and the entrance. There are several icons, messages and stickers. Some are telling the emergency services how to open the door, some boast a spurious ISO qualification which is an irrelevance to most passengers, we have a man with a walking stick telling us – well actually I don't know what, there is the maker's badge, the fleet number and an icon for wheelchair users portraying (thought not explicitly saying) low-floor vehicle.

Psychologists will tell you all this is a very bad way to convey facts. One should never give mixed messages to users. Some of these are for the passenger and some are not, but it is all displayed on the bus and we expect the user to filter the 'for me' and 'not for me'. One golden rule of graphic communication is to make clear what is what and keep each separate message in its own unambiguous space. By offering non user information mixed in the same space as user information, the usual outcome is confusion.



I agreed with Andrew Braddock a few months ago when he said to me: "Another pet hate is the use of large running-number boards in front windscreens; at Lower Sloane Street today I boarded a 452 in the company of a little old lady who asked the driver: 'are you a 230, dear, only that's what it says right in front of you'? Sure enough, the most readable thing, at eye level, on the front of the approaching bus, was the clear black 230 on a dayglow yellow board!" (These photographs were taken at a latter date to illustrate what the user sees.)



Seeing the world through the users' eyes. Boarding passengers are invited to know that this vehicle is wheelchair accessible; the close proximity of the bar & circle icon suggests that they too should take notice of this (even if it is then dismissed – what actually is it telling them?). Cognitive load is thus unnecessarily increased. The load is further increased by the close proximity of the number 351. Why would a passenger ignore this straight away? It is in their direct eye-line and next to other information they believe is aimed at helping them. Perhaps they ignore all of it. If this is dismissed as not being a problem, then consider what else users ignore – when we don't want them to.





This bus accepts push chairs, mothers with children, wheelchairs, men with walking sticks, anyone who is smiling, and more wheelchairs.

that don't necessarily operate within a few miles of one another but nevertheless end up on the same citywide map, using the same route number. In the UK we have multiple telephone providers but none are allowed to issue subscriber numbers that are already in use by a competitor. Why then are bus operators allowed to run routes with the same number (identity) already used by a another one? We need robust regulation for route identities within the same towns/cities, for the sake of the end users.

CONVEYING THE MESSAGE

The concept of Where to Board schemes works well, though they are widely misunderstood by the industry and commonly not implemented comprehensibly (Buses 682 p34). There are answers to this and they are mostly simple; the real problem is the inability of providers to see things through the public's eyes. Levels of assumed knowledge are far too high. Try asking most non bus professionals what the letter on top of the flag means and you will find that mostly no-one knows. Don't take my word for it, try it for yourself.

Recently, solar-powered lighting has appeared on some London bus stop flags. It is a shame the light shines on the bar & circle symbol and not on the route numbers. And why are we still putting up with timetables that are too small, in panels too narrow on poles at bus stops? The infrastructure of the bus stop flag/pole/shelter needs to move into the 21st century and be seen as a single holistic entry point onto the system.

Bus destination displays are a huge nationwide problem, partly caused by inadequate display space, partly by bluntly bad typography and typeface choice, and partly by the displays themselves often being dot matrix technology we were proud of (actually I wasn't) in the early 1970s. Pocket calculators had dot matrix displays then and are somewhat more advanced now. Bus blinds haven't improved at all. (In terms of content and logic, they have actually regressed.)

We are now in the age of high-definition television screens; can we have these on the front of the bus, and to sizes suitable for the job? I would love to pursue this but first I need to make decision makers realize it matters. My reverence to the work of Edward Johnston is well known to anyone who has come near me. This is an ideal time for everyone to see how important what he achieved was. It is not 'heritage' – his typeface (it is not a 'font', but that's another story) is a fantastic tool for the initiated.

London is about to get a new bus and I have already encountered criticism of inadequate destination blind display. Has any operator or vehicle designer researched what an 'adequate' and perhaps a 'better' display area might be? The excellent blinds London has had made for decades have been deteriorating in legibility recently. Electronic screens, programmed by someone who understands legibility – on a moving vehicle, in poor light or weather – can solve this. The cost is probably trivial when factored in to the purchase price of each one, and a lifetime of running costs.

There is one massive and overriding problem – it is 'the insider's inability to see the outsider's view' (I pinched that from a 1954 report – some things never change). The trouble is that all this is not seen as a science, which it is. Most people can count, but they don't regard themselves as mathematicians. Why do information providers think they understand the science of communication, when most of them have no formal or informal training and little more than enthusiasm and a PC. Not just buses, the whole industry has a major problem and is completely blind to it. The solutions are affordable, they just need recognition and expertise. Doing this sort of thing knowledgeable, efficiently and effectively, is a benefit – not a cost.

Accepting that reproducing this sort of photograph does it a real disservice, the lettering for the destination is very hard to read unless the bus is stationary and close – and this is the sort of angle from which it will be frequently seen.

