

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

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INTRODUCTION

Everything in transport, from roads and bridges to local bus and train services are built from the outset for people. To connect, to transport and to enable people to get where they need to be to better their lives – whether this is for employment, education, health and wellbeing, or social purposes.

Sometimes however, engineering, operational and funding constraints mean that the best laid plans go astray through the course of transport projects and the end result may not fully suit the people they were created for.

This paper will show how we can bring people back to the forefront of everything we do in planning and delivering transport infrastructure and operations.

It will outline how important customer focus and community engagement is in successfully providing, and growing public transport services.

This paper will cover:

- The creation of a dedicated Customer Focus team within a Council Transport department, and how this structure is successful in increasing customer satisfaction and patronage growth.
- Best practice in stakeholder and community engagement
- Case studies on bus network changes done right, and community based events that work – including retirement village roadshows.

Let's generate discussion in the importance of customer experience research and the complete integration with operations and network planning teams to ensure the passenger is at the heart of everything we do.

Let's change the face of transport in New Zealand – and bring it back to putting people first.

FIRST THINGS FIRST: FOCUS ON THE PASSENGER

Our customers – passengers when we are talking public transport – are why we build roads, create bus routes and set up rail networks. Everything we do in public transport planning and operations should come back full circle to passenger needs and wants. Often we find ourselves swimming in business cases, budgets and general politics – however we need to take a step back and remember that the passenger should be at the heart of everything we do.

Take building a new road for example. We don't make a road straight just for the ease of building it that way – roads are built straight to reduce driving times for users, and to make the road as safe as it can be for all road users. But look at this from a public transport point of view and things can sometimes get a bit blurry. Planners love straightening out bus routes for scheduling efficiency and reducing the cost of vehicle kilometres and driver hours. But does the straighter route help 87-year-old Edna who can no longer easily walk to the bus stop? Edna's ability to use the bus has now been removed. As a result, Edna's independence in mobility may also have been lessened and she may no longer be able to make her appointments at the doctor, or visit her friends, or head to social activities – all things that have a direct impact on her wellbeing.

Often these transport planning decisions are about compromise. This change may have a negative impact on Edna, but the money and time saved on the route may have a positive effect on others along the newer, straighter route. The key to this decision, and many others that public transport planners face on a day to day basis is keeping a focus on the customer, and putting people first.

BRINGING CUSTOMER FOCUS VALUES INTO THE TEAM

Many organisations have 'customer focus' as one of their values or part of their mission statement or purpose. But in public transport we need to ensure this customer focus is really at the forefront of everything we do.

Often there are individuals within a team who 'speak up' for the customer, but what about the concept of a whole team based on this ideal? 'Customer service' teams often get the negative end of decisions. Bus route changes can culminate in a large amount of complaints – all at the end of the project. How about flipping that business model on its head, and have members of the customer service team be involved in these projects from the beginning.

Consider changing the customer 'service' team, to a customer 'focus' team and you'll see how quickly others in the organisation will look to your team for advice on decisions that will impact on customers.

Case study example: Restructuring the Waikato Regional Council transport team to put a focus on the customer

In April 2017, the Waikato Regional Council Public Transport Operations team was restructured to ensure best management of operation of the local bus services.

The team was changed from a flat management structure with all staff reporting to one manager, to a tiered structure with a manager and three team leaders (Customer Focus, Operations and Network Planning), with all staff reporting into one of these sections.

Splitting the team allowed for a dedicated focus in these areas, but also provided a framework for the three team leaders to work together on all major projects.

The Customer Focus team now consists of front counter staff, a customer analyst, customer and stakeholder reps and marketing and communications staff.

Key benefits of the team structure:

- Having staff jointly responsible for feedback and complaints management, face to face passenger communications, as well as external stakeholder engagement work which keeps the job varied and staff being involved in a good mix of the positive and negative aspects of the role.
- The team structure also includes a customer analyst who goes above and beyond with passenger complaints. Although the bus operators deal with the majority of complaints, all feedback is first triaged in-house, tracked, analysed and reported on. This enables the Customer Focus team to follow trends, bring up, and solve issues directly with the operations and network planning teams.
- The Customer Focus team is not just 'focused' on resolving complaints for existing passengers. With 96% passenger satisfaction (2017 Bus User Satisfaction Survey - Waikato), customer retention, but also patronage growth are key aspects of the business, and crucial to this success is marketing. Having the marketing, social media and communications functions as a part of the Customer Focus team is really important. Often these elements of the business are held outside the transport team in a council communications unit, but having dedicated staff embedded within the Customer Focus team has been of huge benefit. All passenger communications, promotion, marketing and social media functions are 'on the ground' at the Transport Centre and are intrinsically interlinked with network operations and planning.

STAKEHOLDER AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Customer Focus staff taking bus open days into the community

Stakeholder communications and building strong relationships is key - if you have the time and resource. Therefore prioritising time to keeping in contact with your stakeholders is another factor in putting people first.

Stakeholders in public transport can include various user groups, disability agencies, schools, tertiary organisations – the list goes on.

Examples of how you can engage with public transport stakeholders include:

- Meeting with stakeholders face to face.
- Attending local community boards.
- Taking out a stand at your university O-week or school open day.
- Presenting to international students when they arrive in your city.
- Getting involved with your local migrant centre and refugee co-ordinator.
 - Attending regular events such as the Blind Foundation social groups or Age Concern meet-up sessions.

The contacts you will make will be so much more beneficial than using one-way communication methods such as newspaper advertising, and your stakeholders will really appreciate your accessibility.

Case study: Retirement village roadshows

With significant bus route changes set to take place in Flagstaff, a suburb of Hamilton, the Customer Focus team identified three large retirement villages as key stakeholders.

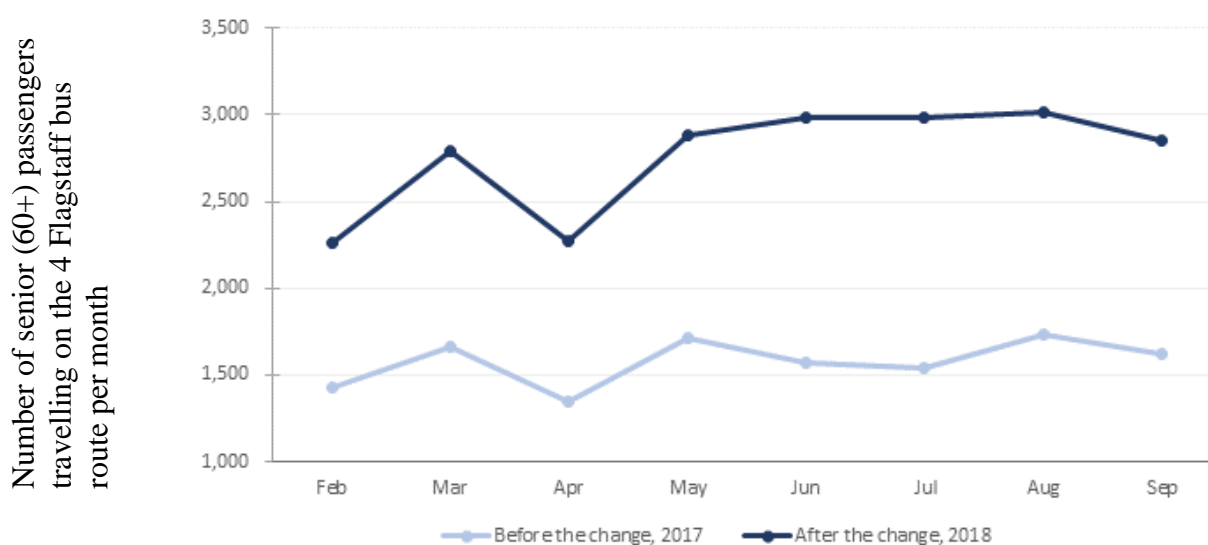


A retirement roadshow example with Summerset Village residents, Hamilton

Visiting and presenting bus information at local retirement villages is part of our business as usual activities, but a targeted programme about a bus route change was undertaken in early 2018. We organised village meetings all residents attended, presented the bus changes, had Q&A sessions over cups of tea, and provided information packs to all residents. We also worked with the bus operator to provide bus ‘recce’ trips on the new route for village residents prior to its launch.

Results: A 74.8% increase in senior passengers (those travelling on 60+ cards or SuperGold cards) on this bus service over the first eight months of the change and strong relationships formed within the retirement villages for ongoing two-way communication.

FLAGSTAFF SENIOR BOARDING TREND



Flagstaff, Senior Pax	Before the change, 2017	After the change, 2018	Diff%
Feb	1,431	2,261	58.0%
Mar	1,665	2,786	67.3%
Apr	1,342	2,273	69.4%
May	1,710	2,883	68.6%
Jun	1,566	2,985	90.6%
Jul	1,542	2,987	93.7%
Aug	1,731	3,018	74.4%
Sep	1,622	2,849	75.6%
Grand Total	12,609	22,042	74.8%

BUS NETWORK CHANGES DONE RIGHT

Bus network changes are made for operational, planning or financial reasons – or at the request of passengers. There could be a safety issue with a bus turning right into traffic, timing may be off in a driver schedule, low patronage numbers may be affecting the bottom line in your operational budget, or a new subdivision may have opened with residents asking for bus services.

Change is not always viewed positively by passengers, but what can make it less accepted is poor

communication. When a change is explained well, passengers usually understand and accept it. Follow the people first philosophy for best practise – engage with your passengers first, involving them in the decision making process, and you will be surprised how smoother things can be.

Follow these four simple steps:

1. **Engage** with your current passengers about the proposed change. How will this change affect them – does it affect their transport accessibility? Can they still make their journeys? Give them the option to contact the team directly if they have concerns about the change. Often there are alternative transport options available the passengers may not be aware of.
2. **Analyse** the results from this customer engagement. Do the passengers' views align with the decisions made in the route change process? Should anything be amended to better serve the passengers?
3. **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Once the decision is finalised advise your passengers – as soon as you can. Examples include:
 - Notices on stops
 - On-bus communications like flyers and posters
 - Maildrops or other targeted advertising
 - Social media campaigns
 - In-app notifications
 - Face to face communications – use your drivers as ambassadors
 - Stakeholder communications
4. And then **communicate some more.** Don't stop once the route change has been implemented. Check in with your passengers – how has the change been for them? Is there anything we can do better? Go back to the people who provided feedback or complained throughout the process to gain more insight and close the feedback loop.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Public transport planning and operations is a complex and highly detailed business. From route planning to driver scheduling to the budget bottom line, there's always competing demands on funding and decision making.

Reflect on the content of this paper:

- Changing your outlook on customer service to a customer focused view
- Building a passionate and dedicated team to lead for the customer
- Undertaking best practise in community engagement and bus network changes
- And look to see how any of these examples and ideas can be undertaken on projects you are involved in.

Next time you go to sign on the dotted line, make what you think will be a relatively minor change, remember to put people first. Think about the passenger in every business decision. Think of 87-year-old Edna who is now unable to use the bus. If you don't speak for her, who will?