CASE STUDY: HUNGARY

Better night bus service for Budapest

The Hungarian capital’s public transport authority BKV rolled out an expanded night-bus service in the fall of 2005 that has doubled overnight ridership while causing minimal impact to the budget. Riders can thank a citizens’ pressure group for proposing the change and getting the ball rolling.

Background & Objectives

Budapest’s night-bus service has long provided a cost-effective transport option for night workers and weekend revellers in the Hungarian capital. But from the time of Hungary’s political changes, its routes and scheduling went unmodified for more than 15 years during a period of massive social and economic change. The routes that existed in 2005 were over-subscribed, and their concentration on the downtown core reflected residential patterns that were two decades out of date. Night routes weren’t synchronised with one another, offering long-distance passengers few connection possibilities.

Meanwhile, the city’s public transportation company (Budapesti Közlekedési Zrt. — BKV) operated a lightly used night-bus service for its own employees. These buses traversed the city throughout the night almost empty, a clear case of inefficiently allocated resources.

The night-bus service needed a drastic overhaul, increasing service where it had become over-subscribed and introducing it to emerging residential areas outside the city centre. However, any improvement would have to adhere to a tight budget.

Implementation

A pressure group devoted to public transportation called VEKE first proposed the idea of revitalising the night-bus service to cover virtually the entire city. Connecting buses would wait for one another, giving passengers quick transfers. A 900 numbering system in line with international convention (“nine” sounding like “night”) would replace the old “É bus” taxonomy (“É” being the first letter in the Hungarian word for “night”). The transformation would be largely accomplished by redeploying BKV’s staff buses, ensuring a modest budget impact.
For months BKV ignored VEKE’s suggestions, being reluctant to change services at its employees’ expense. But VEKE, which has a permanent advisory role on the Public Operations Committee of the City Assembly — the body holding BKV’s purse strings — was able to go over the transport authority’s heads. The Assembly agreed the service needed changing, and successfully pressured BKV to address the issue. Although VEKE’s plan wasn’t adopted wholesale, its basic elements were left intact. An expanded, improved service was rolled out on September 1, 2005 and modified several months later. It now comprises 29 lines with 1,585 stops as compared to the previous 19 lines with 752 stops.

Conclusions
The improved service has been wildly popular, having nearly doubled BKV’s overnight ridership. Weeknight traffic has jumped from 22-24 000 passengers per night to approximately 40,000. Weekend service (meaning Friday and Saturday nights) has seen a rise from 30-32,000 passengers per evening to about 56,000. On the busiest line, the 906, ridership on weekend nights can reach 1,000 passengers/hour/route.

The service continues to provide a safe, and now much less claustrophobic, mode of travel for those partaking in Budapest’s nightlife and it now serves many more of those city residents who start their work shifts at daybreak. It has also assured the continuation of a no-cost means of commuting for BKV’s night employees.

Insofar as BKV based some of the improvements on its careful study of the experience of Prague, the improvements that BKV made could serve as a model for other cities. BKV’s experience shows how a transport authority can improve its services without breaking its budget. But perhaps the biggest lesson is how such changes can be driven by transport users. BKV acknowledges that the changes were motivated partly due to “several requests from public transport users” and it’s clear that the dedicated lobbying of VEKE played a crucial role. One of the clear strengths of VEKE’s campaign was that the group had an established relationship with the City Assembly, and its proposal reflected a keen understanding not only of the service’s shortcomings but of a specific, inexpensive way these could be addressed.

Author
Greg Spencer

Contact
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