



READING, UNITED KINGDOM

High Quality Bus Services – Reading Buses

Background/context

Reading Transport Ltd. operates public bus services in Reading and to a smaller extent in the rural areas around Reading. The council is the sole shareholder of Reading Transport Ltd.

Case description

In 2008 Reading's buses carried 20 million passengers. Its fleet of 200 buses covered 10 million kilometres and the company's turnover amounted to £22 million. Since 2004, Reading Transport Ltd. and the Reading Borough Council have made significant investments to upgrade the quality of Reading's main urban bus routes.

Reading has key routes which have remained more or less unchanged for decades. Its most significant route is the west to east cross-town number 17 service, which runs eight times an hour during the week, and every 15 minutes on a Sunday.

The routes of the Reading area have been branded as Premier Routes, with each route or group of routes allocated a distinctive colour. In order to identify and distinguish the different routes, the colours are also indicated on maps and other information material. Premier Routes provide a week-day daytime frequency of 3 to 8 buses per hour, depending on the route. Other routes, including rural routes and non-premier urban routes, operate at a lower frequency, varying from several buses a day to two buses an hour. These services can be identified by their grey colour on maps and other information material. The routes are cur-

rently covered by a fleet of buses with a new silver and charcoal gray livery – a colour scheme similar to that used on the premier routes – and by vehicles designed in the colour schemes previously used. This new design was aggressively marketed both towards the general public and targeting existing bus users in Reading.

Legislation and policy issues

Reading Transport Ltd. is one of the few remaining municipal bus companies in the UK.

The relationship between the council as shareholder and the board is set out in the company's Memorandum and Articles of Association, which were authorised by the former Transportation Committee of the Borough Council.

Results

Passenger numbers are growing. The latest figures, published in spring 2008, indicate that up to 10.6% of passengers are new each year, with 9% of existing passengers no longer travelling for one reason or another, including people moving out of the area. Reading's buses started to deploy no-change fareboxes a few years ago. These are automated ticket machines, fitted on the buses, which do not offer change to the passenger. This innovation has sped up the service and has taken work off the hands of drivers. The combination of the simple fares and fareboxes works well, so the challenge is to increase ridership to meet the above-inflation cost increases of fuel and wages and not to raise fares.



Problems

Despite good frequencies offered by Reading buses, there are shortcomings regarding the network of bus priority lanes, and some interruptions on major corridors can lead to delays of 10 minutes. The enforcement of bus priority lanes, including the inner ring road which is for buses only between 11.00 and 16.00, is not as good as it should be.

Transferability and success factors

Because Reading is a popular town for shopping, bus services that run frequently at all times of the day including the evening are an important precondition to initiate behaviour change in favour of public transport.

Reading Buses has a history of experimenting with bio-fuel, including biodiesel and alcohol fuel. Other uncommon options like vegetable oil have been tested. In late 2007, Reading Buses placed an order with Scania for 14 new ethanol-fuelled, double-decker buses. This was, at that time, the largest order for ethanol-fuelled buses ever placed in the UK. In March 2008 the fleet running on Premier Route 17 was replaced by biodiesel powered vehicles. By 2008, all but one of Reading's buses was fuelled by a mixture of 5% biodiesel and 95% conventional diesel. Now Reading is one of the ethanol-fuelled Scania OmniCitys.

Lessons learnt

Marketing the implementation of newly designed bus services raises both the visibility of the new services (leading to increased passenger numbers) and builds on the overall image of the public transport company as having the interests of its customers in mind.

Conclusions

With Route 17, Reading Bus offers a high quality bus corridor. By using environmental friendly fuels and running economical buses the operator has already adapted to new requirements with respect to stricter emission regulations, and thereby creates the basis for sustainable transport. Marketing the newly designed services was very successful. The average annual increase in passenger numbers, particularly on the Premier Routes, would appear to support this.

References and contacts

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