

Summary

Perception and reality

People act according to their perceptions. Sometimes these are based on their own experiences, other times on feelings and – possibly vague – impressions. Perceptions of public transport (PT) are no exception. People always have an opinion about the PT system. Some know the system like the back of their hand, others base their judgment on hearsay or on experiences from the distant past. The latter can result in large disparities between perception and reality, as a result of which people act according to perceptions that are no longer accurate.

There are indications that this also holds true for PT to a certain extent. It has been demonstrated that PT users more positively view PT than non-users. This could be based on a correct assessment of the situation, but it could also mean that the perception of the non-users is less or not at all in keeping with the facts. For example, research has shown that motorists overestimate travel times and the cost of public transport.

Increased use of the transport system

Some of those who make little or no use of PT choose their mode of transportation based on incomplete or outdated information. If these people are given a more accurate view of PT, they will be in a position to make a more informed decision, possibly even to try PT. They will then be able to more accurately assess whether PT is a suitable addition or alternative, which could increase the use of the transport system, and the growth of PT. However, the following points should be noted:

- Cars and PT are not 'communicating vessels'. The markets are partly separate. This means that improving the image of PT may lead to increased PT usage, and that this will only be partially reflected in reduced use of cars.
- Not all target groups are equally relevant and/or easy to convince. Increased use of PT will most probably occur among the group of travellers (or part of this group) that are able to choose (i.e. those who have a car, but who also use PT with some regularity).
- Only some aspects of image can be improved. In this study, we look at travel time, costs and the environment. Taken on average, PT can – when it comes to travel times – only compete with cars with regard to long-distance trips. Despite the fact that PT is on average

half as expensive as travel by car (taking all integral and other costs into consideration), this is only relevant for people who do not yet own a car and are considering buying one. Those looking at the costs in that regard will notice that PT is cheaper. For those who already own a car, only the marginal costs (e.g. fuel, parking) are relevant, in which case the costs of travelling by car or PT do not differ significantly (when travelling alone). When more passengers are involved, a car quickly becomes the less expensive option. In general, PT is more environmentally friendly than cars, but here too the number of passengers is a relevant factor.

- It is only worthwhile to improve the image where performance is good. There are also aspects in which PT falls short when compared to travel by car. Travelling by car, for example, is often much faster over short distances than PT (the circumstances prior to and after the journey are relatively quite time-consuming). PT is relatively poor in rural areas. There is little service at night. Travelling is not always comfortable (due to a lack of passenger information). The PT experience often disappoints (more effort required for design, light and warm colours, reduction of disruptive noises, etc.).
- Consumers will not be convinced by averages. In general, certain aspects of PT do not fare too badly, but what is the situation for individual users? The advantages of PT differ according to the time, location and purpose of the journey.

In summary: it is possible to improve the image of PT, but not for everybody, and not with regard to all aspects, for all locations or at all times of the day.

An explanation of the poor image

Many factors explain why PT suffers a poor image. These factors have to do with the service offered, communication and the social/administrative context of PT. Although little can be done for some of these aspects, other aspects do offer clear opportunities.

The current situation

The PT sector has already taken action on a number of aspects, the most significant of which is creating added value. A product can be made more attractive by adding something to it. This can be done in many ways, such as small giveaways or through association with popular brands, products or people. For example, Dutch Railways (NS)

creates added value by showing that train passengers can do more than just travel – trains are also a place to work or read. Train travel is also receiving more added value through the creation of stations with restaurants, boutiques and trendy hair salons.

Secondly, the sector is acknowledging that the media is particularly important to the perception of PT – it is essential to be represented positively in the news. NS in particular aims to supply the media with positive, yet accurate reporting.

Thirdly, it is crucial to anticipate trends and developments, an area in which the PT sector is also active. For example, by acting on the importance of the themes of sustainability and the environment, the sector is placing a major focus on the 'green' character of PT.

Unused opportunities

In addition to the aspects already being acted on, there are still some aspects of image that present opportunities. Firstly, the potential of subconscious influence has been not been explored much. Various psychological experiments have shown that factors such as smell, colour, sound, temperature and design can have a temporary, but powerful impact. These influences usually remain hidden and rarely emerge in surveys. It is precisely in this respect that passengers have negative experiences, whereas these aspects determine the – possibly subconscious – manner in which the journey is experienced. Improved performance with regard to these aspects will help to improve the image of PT.

Secondly, the PT sector should take more advantage of the needs of certain target groups, like young people. For example, many young people see the bus as something 'from the old days'. There is also very little for young people to experience on PT. A spruced-up appearance and modern facilities (Internet access, screens showing information and/or clips, possibly in specific compartments) could create greater appeal among young people.

Thirdly, innovation is of major importance to a product or service. The transport companies undoubtedly possess the will to innovate, but they could be given a helping hand. The key to this lies in contracts developed by local authorities, which could include more incentives that reward transport companies for increased passenger numbers.

Fourthly, there is no collective PT campaign – the transport companies mostly advertise their own products. Up to now, there has been no common identity, and few realise that all parties involved need each other to ensure further development of the 'PT market'.

A PT campaign, possibly combined with a 'PT day', could create positive media exposure for PT and emphasise, for example, the fact that it is environmentally friendly. However, a collective PT campaign is not a panacea. Only if certain conditions are met (including agreement on PT's unique selling point) can this type of campaign contribute to the image of PT.