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A NEW DESTINATION FOR TRANSIT

Morgan Lyons of Lyons Strategic analyses how the current pandemic might change the path of public transport long after the current restrictions are over.

The current pandemic has been something of a nuclear winter for transit operators. Their souls are bruised by employee deaths in the line of duty, depleted cash and credit reserves, and ridership losses that they can only pray are not permanent. The prize for survival is hopefully – finally – a greater recognition that their services are ‘essential’. Now they need to convert this new public ‘wokeness’ (awareness) into the meaningful investment of funds that will help them restore service cuts and create a safe, welcoming, and efficient environment for customers and employees.

This will not be a flip-a-switch recovery. The historic San Francisco cable cars and their riders do not just return overnight. New York City will think long and hard before restoring its subways to 24-hour operation. Transport for London will have some major challenges as it seeks to restore service levels with passengers still staying away.

Stalled expansion projects around the world are not likely to pick up where they left off, or continue along their pre-existing path when the financial plans and ridership models supporting them are obliterated. And how long will it take for customers to feel safe on a traditionally packed rush-hour train?

It will take lots of money, bold thinking, and visionary leadership to get us safely to the other side of this pandemic. Many industry observers think it might take years to recoup their losses and create a clear ‘new normal’.

Organise your thinking

The successful transit CEOs I have observed are generally focusing their efforts on three broad areas: programme, money, message.

Each of these can expand to suit the style of the boss and agency culture, but everything ultimately comes back to those three. Organising one’s thoughts concisely is particularly valuable in this asymmetrical environment; it helps everyone focus and should make it easier to communicate needs and expectations to staff and customers alike.

Remembering our purpose

The main job of any transit operator is to move people safely and efficiently. But current ridership and service losses not only change the immediate programme, they profoundly change the length and scale of the recovery. External forces influencing ridership today



▲ San Francisco's Market Street in late April 2020, devoid of streetcars and devoid of people; a scene that has been mirrored in major cities around the world in the past few months. S. Hahn Darlin / CC-BY 2.0

“It will take lots of money, bold thinking, and visionary leadership to get us safely to the other side of this pandemic.”

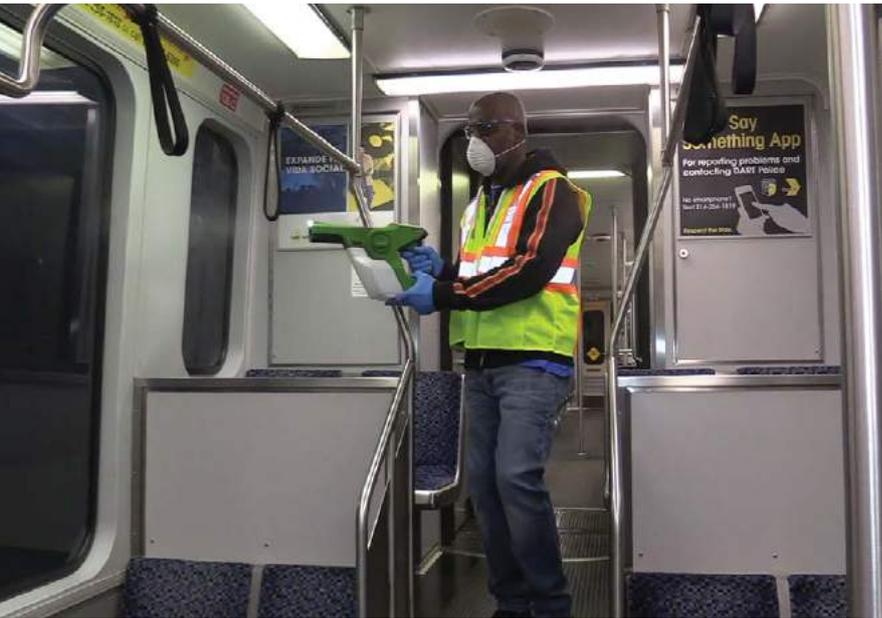
will continue to do so as service is restored. In Milan, morning and evening rush hours are being staggered to disperse passenger loads. In Wuhan, more people are returning to the private car. Throughout the United States, cities are taking hard looks at sidewalk widths to allow pedestrians more room, and giving new attention to more and larger bicycle lanes. A quick Google search turns up lots of articles on anticipated increases in telework or telecommuting.

While the programme may be the same today as in January, it will be fundamentally – and perhaps permanently – changed by the events of the past months that have altered the customer’s perception of a safe trip. Essential or not, transit operators must explain why they are still here and re-justify their existence.

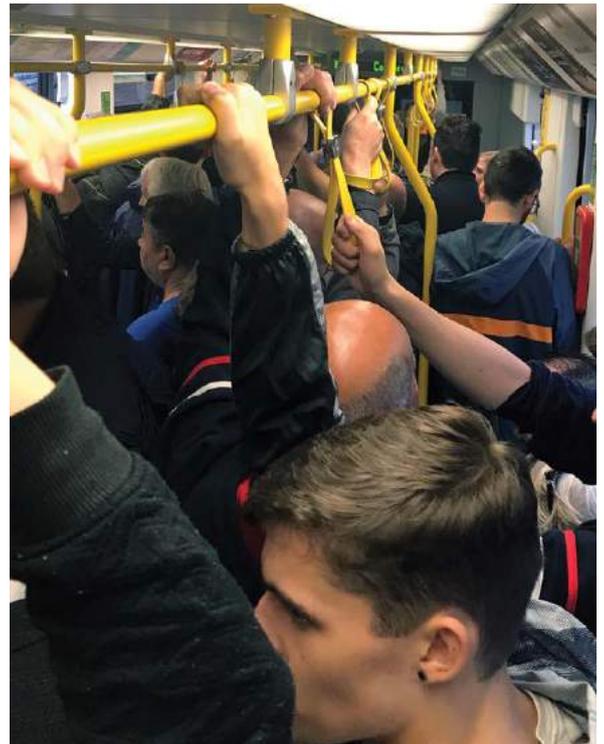
Transit provides mobility. There is simply no way to build enough roads to keep large cities functioning. We figured this out in the 19th Century as urban rail systems and subway projects were launched. Younger, rather less dense, but still rapidly-growing cities are learning. As more than one transit planner has said, people don’t bring their roads with them when they move to a new city.

Second, transit connects people to basic services. Recent months have made this point abundantly clear as operators have proved time and again that they are often an essential link for a community’s residents to hospitals, grocery stores, and financial services. Hospitals are a great example. Not only do people need them for treatment, but they are often major employment and education centres. Both are vital functions. San Francisco is being studied for its decision to completely alter its routing in April to focus its efforts on essential services alone.

Third, transit is a regional economic engine. Transit oriented development (TOD) has a multi-billion-dollar impact in countless cities. While we think of the new TOD projects built around rail transit in places like Dallas, Texas, or Portland, Oregon, or parts of



▲ ABOVE: Cleaning on the DART network in Dallas, US. The pandemic has meant a step-up in the need for confined spaces to be ruthlessly, and continuously, cleaned. DART



► RIGHT: A thing of the past: We won't see packed LRV carriages like this for some time as social distancing requires operators to limit the number of passengers per vehicle. TAUT

London, we do not have to go that far back in history to consider cities that would not exist but for access to rail. While transit critics, particularly in the US, discount the value of TOD as a success metric, there is ample research demonstrating its economic impact in terms of employment and expanded tax revenue.

Transit operators, stakeholders and customers need to have hard conversations about how to balance these elements to best meet the needs of their community. It is not one size fits all. I will also suggest, that because of the anticipated evolving nature of the recovery, the balance of those priorities will change – and perhaps frequently. Operators are having those conversations now, and if not then they should be.

‘Remember the pennies’

A family therapist friend taught me that concept long ago. It is sound relationship counsel, but it is even better when your organisation is bleeding cash and the bank is running dry. Successful CEOs know where their pennies come from, how they are being spent, and how many they have to buy nice, new things like modern vehicles and service expansions.

Unprecedented ridership drops and the resulting loss in passenger revenue is bad enough. COVID-19 is a double whammy for those who depend on sales tax and other funding sources that are based upon consumer behaviour. Then there is the impact of increased operating expenses for overtime, hazard pay, additional vehicle cleaning, more protective equipment for employees, and the list goes on.

But don't fret. There is plenty of government money to make up the difference. It's OK. You can stop reading at this point for a chortle, laugh, scream, or cry.

Transit operators in the US are benefiting from USD25bn in federal support as part of the various trillion-dollar initiatives. But for

many that will only help keep them afloat for a few months. An additional round of short-term federal funding is being pursued. But there is no reasonable expectation that in a presidential election year Congress will do meaningful work on permanent long-term funding.

This is a global problem. While various governments are making immediate cash injections, there is simply not enough money to cover every element of society that is being adversely affected. It is true even in countries, unlike the US, with true national rail transit policies. Further, governments do not know how much they will need to invest to support the next level of 'normal' operations.

Operators and authorities are adjusting their budgets in real-time. But there is only so much of that one can do and still run a service, so advocates must redouble their efforts to secure substantial, sustained, and predictable funding. It really is time for national governments to put their monies where their mouths are when calling out transit as an essential service.

Manage the message

One enduring lesson from this crisis should be the reminder that messages need to be concise, memorable, and honest. For example, some version of “wash your hands”, “stay home if you're sick”, is likely burned into everyone's brain at this point.

Every CEO has their elevator pitch to concisely describe their agency and how it benefits their community. This is how the CEO reinforces and builds support for their vision, it gets everyone on the same page. That is especially true in a crisis. Maybe even more so in a crisis like this one.

Employees are looking for answers. They want to be safe. They want to be led. They want to be part of the solution. After all, they are still coming to work every day!

Employees want to believe in their leaders. They want to trust what they are hearing.

They want to know what their organisation is doing and be able to take that message to their neighbours. CEOs must give them that message.

Having a shareable and memorable message will be particularly important as organisations build support for renewed public investment in transit. Transit advocates need to take the same message to elected leaders. The establishment of new and evolving service levels will require frequent, clear and honest communication from operators. It is an essential part of establishing trust.

‘Do what you do’

The American football coach Tony Dungy used to tell his players, “Do what you do. Whatever it takes.” That is good advice in this environment. A football match, whether American or FIFA, is always changing. It requires players and their leaders to adapt.

Coronavirus has created a new game for transit operators and customers. Reaching agreement on safety – what it will take for people to feel comfortable sharing a crowded train, is a start. As they plan and carry out their return, focusing on the fundamentals of programme, money and message will help them finish successfully. TAUT

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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