

Is it valid to use verbatim statements from a collection of variable survey reports to identify how non-users perceive bus services?

Peter Wiltshire

Secretary, Ten Percent Club (a group of senior people in the bus service industries)
and
Research Fellow at CTS

Tel and Fax: 01494 866944 email: p.wiltshire10@btinternet.com

The bus services industry has an annual turnover of some £4bn. It has taken 20 years since privatisation for the industry to mature to the point where there is now the capacity to effectively search for new customers as does any other retail product manufacturer. To transport planners this means that there is now the financial muscle to buy into the same marketing concepts that are employed in the car industry.

But the market research data that is currently available is of little value, being based almost exclusively upon quantitative surveys of existing passenger opinion on standardised passenger satisfaction indicators that are almost entirely concerned with rational perceptions of functional attributes. To raise awareness within the industry of the need for more relevant market research, the Ten Percent Club has been searching for evidence that would give an indication of the trends and values that products need to emulate if they are to be attractive to prospective customers.

Some bus service companies currently employ market research firms to carry out ad hoc opinion surveys in relation to projects that they are considering. Most of the reports contain an element of qualitative work or, at least, unsolicited verbatim statements from respondents. Hitherto, industry paradigms have prevented the professionals (including many transport planners) to fully engage in the consideration of the irrational and emotional perceptions held by prospective customers and the focus has remained upon the basic functionality of services as might be expected if only existing user opinion is sought.

The question arises to what degree it is reasonable to postulate hypotheses for cataloguing emotional attitudes based upon an examination of the terminology of verbatim statements contained in the market research reports. Examples include "kids are a nightmare" and "dirty and smelly buses". Obvious problems arise in the interpretation of words by the examiner but how can these be minimised and what other problems are there?

Peter Wiltshire has spent 35 years in transport planning, most of which has been concerned with public consultation, but he is not a market researcher. He is now retired but was party, with Glenn Lyons and Peter Stonham, the editorial director of Transit and Local Transport Today, to inviting bus industry people to establish the Ten Percent Club. They were met with a surprising degree of enthusiasm.