

# What Colour Is Your Journey?

Heather WEBSTER

## **Abstract**

*This paper looks at the use of colour and branding to position and promote public transport in Adelaide, South Australia, an extremely competitive transport environment. Branding is used to ensure that the image of public transport which is presented to the customer is standard, of high quality and provides the comfort and reassurance of a known and trusted brand. The same style and themes are repeated in timetables, kerbside information, websites and advertising to reinforce the brand and build familiarity. Branding can help achieve the public recognition necessary to meet the worthy aims of public transport, and attract the resources and support of a community.*

## **Introduction**

All around the world, governments invest in public transport in recognition of the broad benefits it brings to their citizens. These benefits are often grouped as economic, environmental, social, safety and health benefits. More importantly, many societies are recognising that well-functioning and accessible public transport underpins a healthy, equitable and sustainable future for the cities we would like to live in.

As a community develops and prospers, the demand for travel increases. The relationships between home, work, family recreation, education and even experiential travel become more frequent and more complex. Personal travel therefore becomes an important facilitator, not only of personal well being, but the ability of all people to contribute to and enjoy the broader wealth of the community.

If we accept, and the evidence is overwhelming, that collective transport is a more economic and sustainable solution than private travel, the challenge narrows to positioning public transport to deliver these benefits.

Like all important problems, the response needs to be well understood, well thought through and comprehensively delivered. Any effective public transport system needs to be designed with the knowledge of the shape and functionality of its city, the needs, aspirations and predilections of its people and a vision for the future. However, good transport design is not sufficient. If we are to offer our citizens a public transport system that is genuinely a quality part of their lives, I believe we need to go beyond the conventional concept of customer service to make public transport the travel mode of choice, not just necessity.

...we need to go beyond the conventional concept of customer service to make public transport the travel mode of choice, not just necessity.

This paper looks at one aspect of this approach, namely branding and the use of colour as basic tools to begin to effectively position and promote public transport in Adelaide.

## Get the Product Right First

Firstly, I offer a word of warning. In marketing terminology, public transport is a low value, repeat purchase product. We want our customers to make the choice to purchase our product most, if not all, of the occasions they travel. This places a strong obligation on the service designers and deliverers to provide a reliable and predictable product to support repeat purchases. You might be able to sell a faulty product once, but public transport providers need to be able to sell this product time after time after time. This means we not only have a tough job to strive for excellence in service delivery, but we need to recognise and reward people for routine work of utter predictability. The ideal may be to deliver exactly the same service, at the same time, every day, all year.

Marketing cannot compensate for poor service, poor design or poor delivery. But it can build awareness, loyalty, appreciation and

Marketing cannot compensate for poor service, poor design or poor delivery.

increase business on a strong foundation of good service design and good customer-focused delivery.

So, task one—get the product right first.

## Why Branding?

Before a customer can purchase anything they need to be sufficiently aware of the product or service to make a choice, and then be motivated to make a decision. When we began the marketing program in Adelaide, we learned that many people were generally aware there were public transport services operating. However they did not have sufficient information to make a decision to use it, or sufficient incentive to be goaded to make a change from their private car. While petrol prices and congestion are creating the right environment for change, lack of information is still one of the important challenges of many public transport systems. Questions like where do services operate, when, how do you get and use tickets—all are barriers between potential users and the system.

The purpose of branding is to unite and represent all the information we offer the customer in a familiar and predictable way to induce them to use and re-use the system. The brand provides familiarity, reassurance and hence comfort to the traveller, leading to a situation in which they are likely to choose or use the product more.

The brand provides familiarity, reassurance and hence comfort to the traveller...

Good brands work. We are surrounded by advertising and promotion of brands which many commercial companies have invested millions of dollars to develop, protect and promote. That sort of investment is not made and maintained without detailed research and demonstrable commercial results. Branding is a concept with which we are all familiar. But what does a brand mean in public transport?

## Building a Brand Identity

The essence of branding is recognition supported by messages—some direct, others more subtle. Brands gain power from repeated presentation and frequent use. In Adelaide, we decided the essence of our brand would be colour, logo and placement which would be uniformly applied across all the components of the system. We had built the reliability of the service sufficiently to have a product worth selling. We had developed a suite of customer information to assist people to understand the product. Next we needed to build a brand to increase awareness and product familiarity in order to increase patronage.

So, task two—select your brand identity.

### *Colour*

Colours are very emotive. There is a large body of work on the use of colour and the emotional responses which are generated by colour. We chose three colours which would be used together in the same way. At the time of this choice, we were contracting the provision of services to private sector companies. One of the major aims of the decision to brand and the choice of colours was to reassure people that the government was still in control of the system and that it was a single integrated system even though services might be delivered by different providers. This was achieved by two strategies. The first was the choice of colours. The second was to have a strong brand based on a single logo and uniform application across the system.

The colours chosen are those used by the state government as part of their branding—yellow, red and blue. These are also the colours of our first football club to join the national league. So the choice of colour already carries two messages—state ownership and state pride in one of our national passions. Another advantage of the colours is strength—these are bold, obvious primary colours. Yellow is the safest colour on the road. It is most easily seen at dawn and dusk, or during rain. It is the colour which can be seen at the longest distance by people with vision impairments. So there are many positives.

## Creating a Standard Look and Feel

Branding takes the colour choice and combines it with logo, text and placement to contribute to a standard look and feel across all elements of the system. The task is to use the colours and styles in prescribed ways across the entire public transport system.

This covers vehicle livery (*Figure 1*), infrastructure, customer information and all advertising and promotion materials. The development and effective use of a brand relies on its controlled and repeated use in predictable ways. Not only does this give the customer a regular and standard view, it also prevents misuse and brand diffusion or confusion.

The implementation of standard branding is best achieved by tight control and prescription. A style guide showing examples, exact colours, positioning of colour, information and the use of text is essential (*Figure 2*). The logo needed to be able to be reproduced effectively in black and white in every size. Mandate its use to ensure absolute uniformity. This is important, not as an expression of control, but to ensure that the face which is presented to the customer is standard, of high quality and provides the comfort and reassurance that familiarity of a known and trusted brand brings.

The elements which contribute to the totality of the communication environment in which a brand is used include not only the livery of vehicles but the placement of information signs, warnings (for example, the presence of video surveillance or road rule guidance on the back of buses) and even advertising from third parties.



Figure 1: Livery for Adelaide Metro vehicles showing uniform branding



Figure 2: Style Guide

Branding needs to be repeated and reinforced in all the information which is provided to customers. Timetables, kerbside information, websites, and advertising which all reflect the same style and themes build familiarity and lessen the opportunities for confusion.

Uniform branding can reinforce the integration across a public transport system. Whether bus, tram or train, the same ticketing, the same rules, the same sources of information are seen to apply. This lessens the uncertainty for customers.

Uniform branding can reinforce the integration across a public transport system.

## Branding in Customer Information

Branding in customer information needs to cover many types of information and communication forms. There are vast amounts of information which needs to be successfully conveyed in small spaces with the least opportunity for confusion. The easiest illustration of this concept is the use of universal signs and symbols. The adoption and use of these has shown benefits which are being extended to road use in many countries.

While we are making progress, I believe there are still many opportunities for improved “embedded” information in public transport systems. By embedded, I mean information which is incorporated in the structure of the system itself which provides information, often without words. The most obvious examples of this concept are location signs. So often, a place name is displayed on a board on posts, forming an obstacle, a target for graffiti or simply a place for birds to perch with the consequent messiness which needs to be cleaned.

With forethought and imagination, place names can be incorporated into walls, pavements, bus shelters or rooves. This is not only more efficient and less costly to maintain, it also provides an opportunity for local communities to interact with creative people to produce works of not just information use but also beauty. This can be used to develop not only a canvas for art and creativity, but a sense of local ownership and pride. It can also be a wonderful vehicle for engaging young people to develop an affinity and respect for public

transport. Figure 3 shows some artwork created for Elizabeth Railway Station by young artists through Carclew Youth Arts programme.

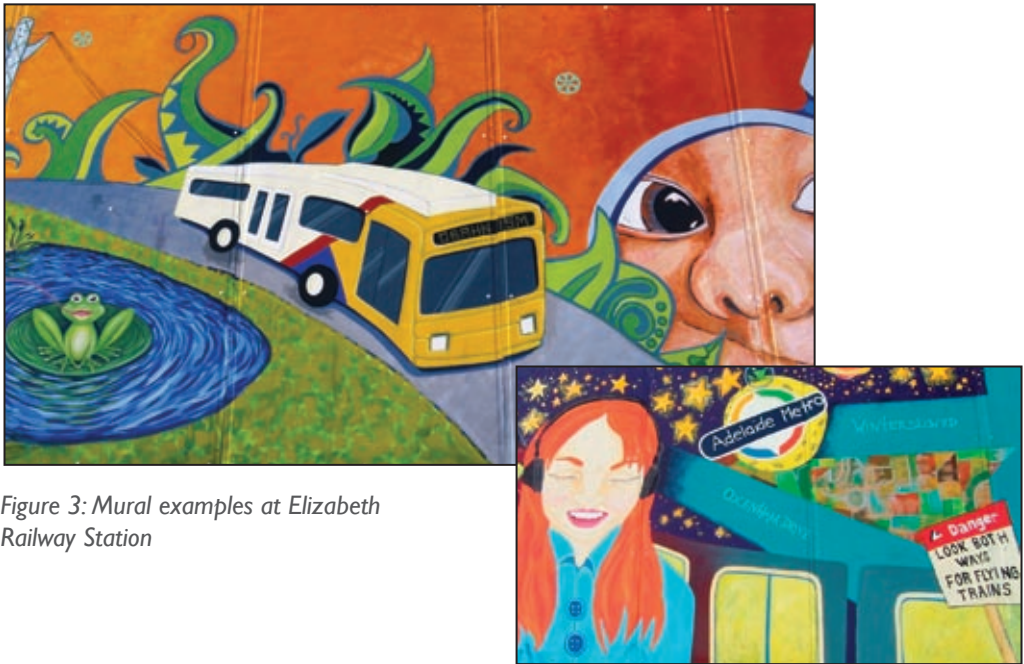


Figure 3: Mural examples at Elizabeth Railway Station

## Red Goes Faster

Branding and colour coding have been used very successfully in many public transport systems. Notwithstanding that a proportion of our customers (particularly men) are colour-blind, colour coding of routes is often used successfully on public transport. This should not be confused with the use of colour in branding.

We all know that red means fast. In Adelaide we developed a “Go Zone” system in which we branded service routes which offered high frequency services with red poles and red information units. Apart from an opportunity to market a new concept which offered the attribute most valued by customers, that is frequency, the “red routes” offered a new way of communication with customers. The ultimate development of this concept is the elimination of the need for timetables. While many large public transport systems in the world

(e.g. the metros in Paris, London) do not need timetables, smaller systems do. This colour coding allows smaller systems to differentiate the parts of their systems which offer high frequency. Hence they have no need for a timetable, unlike other parts of the system for which a timetable is necessary for efficient travel.

There is a dichotomy in the need and benefit of providing information about public transport services between areas of high frequency and low frequency. Routes offering high frequency have the lowest need for information because high frequency involves low risk of not getting a service. Customers with access only to low frequency services have the greatest need for information on service timetable. However, in public transport, we are attracted to providing services (including facilities and information) to those areas which will benefit the greatest number of people. Therefore the tendency is to provide the most information to the parts of the system which carry the most people, although this group may have the lowest need for information. Colour coding can offer a highly cost-effective way of communicating frequency. This allows us to concentrate information services to those most in need, which is in areas of low service supply.

## Is Your Brand Working?

Brands need time and repetition to achieve penetration (public recognition) in the market. Most public transport systems have many opportunities for exposing a brand, for example, vehicles, infrastructure, web presence, tickets, timetables. Indeed every element of the system should be thought of as an opportunity for achieving recognition and reinforcement of the brand. Brand recognition alone can have value, especially in multiple element systems (which most public transport systems are) for which the main purpose of the brand is the message of unification. For example, all these trains and buses belong to the same network and can be used together. Brand recognition is easily measured through focus groups. It must also be protected, for it also represents a risk if de-valued. Product familiarity (brand recognition) is a key tool in customer reassurance.

The value of a strong brand can go well beyond recognition to convey many emotional and practical messages which can be used to influence behaviour and build customer loyalty. Again, the value of the brand needs to be supported by the quality of the product. The basic meanings that should be associated with public transport systems include safety, reliability and convenience, but this is not sufficient. The brand can be used to carry new products, to increase patronage, to encourage loyalty, to be known and dare I say loved. We need to build the value of the brand and the diversity of the offerings to be highly valued in our communities. I would argue it is not sufficient for public transport to be functional or even efficient. If public transport is to be truly valued and supported to meet the worthy aims of environmental sustainability, healthy and wealthy communities living in socially inclusive civilized cities, we need to attract the resources and support of our communities. To do this, we must be recognised and valued, and the first step in this process is branding.

## Conclusion

As the complexity of our world increases, brands offer familiarity. The dominance of branded products and franchising demonstrates the power of these concepts in our modern world. Branding provides the basic tool for building suites of marketing and promotional products to position public transport beyond basic functionality to offer a combination of community and personal service and satisfaction. The latter is an element which car manufacturers exploit so well in their advertisements. Unless we rise to this challenge, we face unsustainable cities with sharpening divisions between transport rich and transport poor. This is a challenge worthy of the best minds and the hardest work.

## Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge the work of Paul Littlejohns, Manager of Customer Information and Business Development, Public Transport Division, DTEI, Adelaide in developing the marketing program for Adelaide Metro and for his tireless advocacy for a customer focus in Adelaide's public transport which has been very important in building patronage.



Heather Webster is the Chair of the International Association of Public Transport Australia/New Zealand (UITP ANZ) and Executive Director of South Australia's Public Transport Division. She has a passion for the role of public transport in building civilised cities for the 21st century. She has had a significant role in developing partnerships with the private sector for service delivery and systems with the focus on the passengers in Adelaide. Improving the information available to customers and reducing the barriers that deter users have been prime strategies in her approach that has delivered consistent growth in patronage against a negative trend. Ms Heather has degrees in science and librarianship and an MBA.