

Bastard Urbanism

Somewhat contrarian takes on urbanism, city planning, and transportation.

Marketing the Freedom of Transit

In [my last blog post](#), I wrote about how a well-functioning transit system can be liberating to its users and offer freedom in a way that owning a car doesn't. Today, I came across an article which offers me the perfect opportunity to build off that point, namely in how to *convey* the freedom offered by transit to a mass audience. Let's talk marketing.

The article in question is [National advertising effort needed by local transit agencies](#), a piece published this week by Ethan Goffman in *Mobility Lab*. The argument put forth by Goffman is that transit could use a marketing push to convey the benefits of transit, and given the limited budgets of local transit agencies, what is needed is some way for transit agencies nationwide to pool their resources to do an advertising campaign they can all use. Goffman also compares some transit advertisements and points out what he likes and dislikes about each one.

Now, I think marketing is overrated just in general in today's society. But it has its purpose, and I think transit could use any boost it can get. That being said, I disagree with Goffman on a few major points in the *Mobility Lab* piece, and I have my own examples of good transit advertising to point to.

Firstly, let's start with what we can all agree on: most contemporary transit advertising in the U.S. *sucks*. A lot of it is very flat and bureaucratic, unimaginative, and oftentimes with a hokey gimmick. A lot of transit advertising is, well, like this:



How to Ride the Bus



Boy, now I'm really excited to take the bus.

Most contemporary transit promotion that I've seen falls into three general categories: 1) instructional videos like the one above, 2) ads that emphasize the benefits over driving, which often incorporate imagery of stressed drivers and high gas prices, or 3) ads that emphasize the societal benefits, such as environmental. Because it's usually the transit agency itself that puts together the ad, the production values are usually very low.

But it didn't always used to be this way. A long time ago, advertising for transit tended to emphasize the *destinations* you could reach by transit, or the nature of the service itself. A particularly notable example of this was Samuel Insull's [series of posters for Chicago's rail system](#) in the 1920s, but there are plenty of other examples. When transit companies advertised, they often did so much like the railroad companies of the time did, with artful representations of the wonderful places you could visit and the exciting things you could do.



When automobiles became the dominant mode of transport for Americans, advertising for transit shifted its focus to emphasizing transit’s role as a potential alternative to driving. This is where we begin to see the selling points for transit familiar to us today: you avoid the stress of driving, you save money, you avoid wear and tear on your car, etc. A good (and artful) early example of this is a pair of animated commercials run by Metropolitan Coach Lines in Los Angeles in the 1950s:

(1956) "The Wax Man"



(1956) "The Unstrung Man"



With mass transit becoming an increasingly public endeavor, subject to limited budgets and operating under an intensely bureaucratic framework, advertising for transit took on a defensive posture, often taking to justifying its existence or framing itself only in terms as an alternative to driving. Needless to say, this doesn't tend to inspire very exciting marketing. Transit advertising has been in quite a rut for a while.

Which is why I was so excited the first time I watched this video:

Metro Expo Line: Downtown Los Angeles to S...



probably the snazziest agency-run transit blog out there right now), Metro produces videos that are splendidly made. The videos they put out to promote the opening of the Expo Line extension to Santa Monica are particularly superb, not just for their catchy music and snappy editing, but also because they accomplish something that American transit agencies have been failing to do for quite some time: they make transit look *glamorous*. They make it look *exciting*. They emphasize where you can go—in short, they illustrate an *opportunity* now afforded to you. There's a sense of possibility evoked by these videos.

The previous video focuses on the route and the trains themselves, highlighting the Expo Line itself. This one (which uses a lot of the same imagery) emphasizes the things you can do along the route, highlighting the personal experiences you can have:

Metro Expo Line: Downtown LA to Santa Moni...



Something I want to highlight with these ads is how straightforward the message is. Besides the “More to Explore” brand, there's very little of the gimmicks we're accustomed to seeing from transit advertising. There's no flat narration (in fact, there's no narration at all), there's no “punny” slogan that makes you groan, no terrible video toaster transition effects, none of that. Simple, straightforward, *focused*.

ads is very clean, efficient and fast — three things that every transit agency should

want to be associated with.

And hey, it's not just rail lines that get the snazzy Metro treatment. How about this one, promoting enhanced bus service to Griffith Observatory? Take note of how much information is conveyed (hours, frequency, and locations) without relying on narration while keeping everything focused and engaging (and in under a minute, no less).

More access to the stars: DASH Observatory t...



Even when Metro makes videos with narration, they know how to keep them focused and engaging. Take this one, which serves as a brief overview of the state of the agency and the projects that will be funded by the recently passed Measure M:

Measure M: An Overview



Now, I will acknowledge that Metro has some advantages that most American transit agencies don't enjoy. For one, Metro obviously puts a lot of money into its marketing department, such that they can apparently afford to get the rights to cool songs, rent drones that take excellent footage of passing trains, and hire editors who know how to do cool slow-motion effects. Metro also enjoys the geographic oddity of having an exceptionally large pool of entertainment and marketing talent right in their own city, and thus a lot of very experienced and talented people eager to take on exactly this kind of work. It's unrealistic to expect every transit agency to be able to produce marketing of this high quality.

But when it comes to something like this, money is overrated. What transit advertising needs is *vision*. It requires *focus*. It should convey the possibilities afforded by your transit system. And all of this can be done without lots of money, so long as a clear vision is adhered to. Take the Griffith Observatory bus video; nothing very fancy there, just some nice shots of a roadway and people enjoying the observatory, with some text added later. But it's still effective.

To bring this back to Goffman's article, I think the examples of transit advertising that he points to as "good" are still quite awful. They're lengthy and resort to lame gimmicks like covering a popular song (but with lyrics praising transit) or list "5 Fabulous Ways to Take Charge of Your Transportation". It's tacky and feels too-clever by half. And in this media-saturated day and age, people are very good at smelling a marketing gimmick. At one point, Goffman argues:

I would have liked to see a more complete message of the benefits of transit snuck into this video. It does go beyond the basic "nobody moves like transit" by stressing the difficulties of driving, being "caught in traffic, stuck in a car." However, numerous other transit benefits could be touted: not having to pay for gas and repairs, not needing one car per family member, and being able to read or play games on your commute. It may be unrealistic to ask for a short ad to also tout the environmental benefits of transit, but other videos stressing this could be part of a

On the contrary, I believe transit advertising should adopt a “less is more” approach. The benefits of transit versus driving are something that transit advertising has already been focused on for decades. It’s not just unrealistic to ask for a short ad to tout all these benefits, it’s counterproductive. Try to tout everything and you’re inevitably going to wind up with something cluttered, which is something you don’t want associated with your transit system.

To this end, I actually don’t think a national advertising campaign for transit would be very beneficial. Besides the basic question of who on the federal level would even fund such a campaign in this day and age (and who exactly would be making the money from this campaign? Will the ads even be good?), the kind of advertising I want to see transit adopt only works if it comes from the local level. Emphasizing the possibilities of your city’s transit agency isn’t something you can contract out to someone outside your city, it’s something that requires local knowledge.

Transit has been defending itself on someone else’s terms for long enough. It’s about time it learned how to sell itself.

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John Perry / July 8, 2017 / advertising, chicago, los angeles, marketing, transit

2 thoughts on “Marketing the Freedom of Transit”

Pingback: [Change In The News - smallchange](#)

This article makes excellent points, but makes a mistake similar to ones made in the Ethan Goffman article referenced here: treating an educational, how-to video as if it's the same as one designed to market transit, either to potential riders or supporters. Failing to recognize that those are two related but different types of videos, with different purposes and audiences, confuses the issues and the arguments.

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