



Your Butt's in the Wrong Seat

A Manifesto for
Public Transportation

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It's not sexy. It's not tracking as a Twitter trend.

And it's not a YouTube sensation.

In fact, by current reputation, it's dirty, it (sometimes) smells, it forces you to interact with people you don't know, it's slow and inconvenient. But it shouldn't be.

Or at least, it shouldn't be positioned and marketed like it is.

Here's the problem with "it." Its competitors are some of the largest, most renowned companies in the world, and despite the current "crisis" affecting the automobile industry, it doesn't stand a chance. "It" is public transportation, and "it" is hurting.

So what's the problem? It's simple; your butt is in the wrong seat.

For the Benefit of a Quick Background

In the public transportation agency, riders are segregated into two segments—transit dependent riders and choice riders.

Transit dependent riders are the stereotypical individuals you might expect to see using public transit. Seniors, persons with disabilities, tourists, low-income individuals, and students comprise the transit dependent market—the main rider base, the core of the transit customers.

So when transit routes and service are planned, they're planned with those demographics in mind. Are there stops near social service agencies? Are transit stops located within a ¼ mile radius of high-frequency stops like hospitals, grocery stores, and multi-family dwellings?

Unfortunately, these destinations aren't the same destinations shared by choice riders. Who are choice riders? Most likely, if you're reading this, it's you.

Your Car is Your Drug of Choice

Choice riders are those people who make a choice to use public transportation—rather than being forced to due to their social and/or economic conditions.

These are the people that choose to forego the comfort of their personal automobiles, the people who wake up early—but only to use a travel alternative that takes a bit longer to arrive at their final destination, the people that make the highways at least one car less crowded for your benefit.

It's a lifestyle change. And every 365 (or so) days, millions of people make lifestyle change resolutions. For some, it's running every day (even though something isn't chasing them), for others, it's giving up pleasure foods (if it feels good, stop doing it—it's probably making you fat).

But for other people, it's a more tangible, real resolution—I'm going to fill in the blank to help save the environment. Some choose recycling, some choose an Energy Star appliance, and a small percentage even chooses to change the way they commute.

A commendable choice, yes?

These are the people that grow and energize a community's public transportation base. So what does it take for more people to make the switch? This isn't the decision to switch from Coke to Pepsi, or from PC to Mac—this decision isn't that easy—this is a change of lifestyle. So what does it take?

It's no secret that transit is a niche product—so we understand that the solutions for expanding a rider base will vary in each situation, but the following enhancements might work to attract YOU, a choice rider to consider trying transit. And, by using transit, you'd help to increase the transit customer base, clean your community's air quality, and mitigate local traffic congestion.

You Say You Got a Real Solution

Let's play a variation of the "what if" game. It's where we figure out what it would take for you to consider using public transportation. I know you have your excuses—and frankly, I'm surprised you're still reading. But if you are still reading, let's address each of your excuses with "what if."

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What if it was closer? You're lazy. I'm sorry, but it's true. Next time you're driving to work, instead of counting the VW Bugs on the road, try counting the number of bus stops you're passing on your way to work. Think of them as a porthole. Each bus stop you pass was an opportunity to save money, to relax, to sleep, to work—take your pick.

Driving past bus stops is an opportunity cost for doing fill in the blank .

But let's pretend for a moment that laziness is acceptable. How close would a bus stop have to be to your house for you to consider using it? Make sure you consider that you're likely to complain if you hear too many buses—so the bus needs to keep its distance from your home.

Or how close does it have to be to your office? What if it was a block away, or what if there was a stop in the very middle of your business center—would you use it then? How close does public transportation service need to resemble a limousine service for you to consider leaving your car at home?

What if you were more fill in the blank ? I'm not sure if it's unfortunate or impressive, but I know of at least 3 people in my office who are capable of driving (or in the case of Los Angeles commuting, sitting in traffic) and updating Facebook, checking email, and reviewing creative pieces at the same time.

Besides the questionable legality of multi-tasking while operating a vehicle (and the inherent danger of it), can you imagine how much more productive you'd be if you used your commute time not staring at the back of the car in front of you and devoting your time to work instead?

Instead of feathering the clutch, you're opening your laptop and finishing your proposal for your next big deal; instead of stopping at the gas station on your way to the highway, you're sleeping-in and enjoying some extra rest (*and then continuing to sleep during your commute*); instead of pulling over to the side of the road in your overheated, flat-tired, grinding-sound vehicle, you're enjoying a *New York Times* best-seller, or perhaps the morning's paper (*if the newspaper business is still alive*).

Do I need to go on?

What if it was free? It's truly sad, but most public transportation agencies around the nation are spending just as much, if not more money on collecting your transit fare than they actually make from collecting it! Yet, transportation agencies are keen on squeezing every penny out of its riders—turnstiles, smart cards, etc.

Public transportation agencies aren't built as a for-profit business—in fact, they rely on federal funding and taxes for the majority of their operations anyway.

Bottom line: Public transportation agencies shouldn't be creating new barriers for prospective customers who might try to use it. And collecting a fare does just that. With a fare-free environment, you're changing the entire public transportation culture. And, to you local transportation agencies out there, changing the culture of your system and allowing people to board when they need to, when you're operating—that's a perfect match.

So! If using public transportation were free, would you consider it? Especially in the middle of this economic environment, you should. Because, right now, using your own car loan plus regular maintenance plus gas expenses plus method of getting from point A to point B just isn't worth it anymore.

What if you were paid? Some organizations give incentives to employees who utilize alternative transportation. Whether it's additional monthly income, discounts at community retailers, tax break benefits, or a monthly fare allowance, by using public transportation, you'll not only save money, but you'll be paid to use it!

If you're not aware of your company's incentive policy, ask your Human Resources representative or visit apta.com for more information about the "It Pays to Ride" program.

You wouldn't turn down a passive income, would you? Because that would be ridiculous.

What if it was faster? Depending on your community, your local transit system may offer peak-hour express routes. What's an express route? It offers fewer stops by bypassing low-frequency stops to make your trip from Point A to Point B faster.

Consider L.A. Metro's Orange Line. This express route operates on its own corridor—avoiding any stop lights, avoiding any traffic, avoiding any anything—all while crossing the infamous "valley" in a matter of minutes. Using an express route service means you have more time in the morning to do (or not do) whatever you do... or don't want to do. Sleep, exercise, read, work—it's your time to do with what you want.

What if it was better for the environment? We should probably rephrase that. Public transportation IS better for the environment, AND for your wallet. But it's easy to just say that it's better for the environment. Let's discuss *how much* better it is.

What follows is real. Real numbers that really impact your environment. Sometimes it's hard to tangibly understand the difference you make by using public transportation just one day every

week. Use the interactive calculator below to determine how you might be able to positive impact both your community's environment and your bottom line—at the same time.

YOUR INFORMATION

# Miles Traveled	_____
Price of Gasoline	_____
Miles per Gallon	_____
# of days using transit/year	_____
Trees Saved	_____
Money Saved	_____
Emissions Reduced (Lb)	_____

So would any of those persuade you to change the way you commute once a week? How about once a month? If so, does your local transportation agency offer such features? And, if they don't, the only way they're going to know you want them is by letting them know. So let them know!

Responsibility? What's that?

So why haven't you considered public transportation before? Probably because it wasn't marketed correctly. To compete against the auto giants, public transit's marketing materials need to match, if not exceed, the creativity and persuasive effectiveness of any other transportation alternatives.

Public transportation must be positioned as the low-cost, low-impact transportation alternative—all without compromising the comfort, quality, and cleanliness that a personal automobile may offer. It also needs to be accessible.

Choice riders are overwhelmingly tech-savvy people. Fortunately, transportation organizations are beginning to realize this and leverage technology as an asset.

Consider technologies like [NextBus](#), which offers transit riders real time information on when transit vehicles will arrive at the next scheduled stop. Or, even more impressive, the unparalleled visibility of [Google Transit](#).

Google Transit is a free service to public transportation agencies and operates as a trip-planning platform. Enter the beginning and end destination to determine if your community has been incorporated into Google Transit's family of agencies. If it has, you'll be given route details, departure times, fares (with comparisons to driving), and travel time—just as you would if you were searching for driving directions.

In fact, if Google Transit is offered in your community and you're searching for driving directions, you'll also be offered public transit details for your choosing.

Taking advantage of high-visibility technologies like Google Transit works to enhance the reputation and service of the transportation agency, and that makes it easier for you to transition from a choice rider into a regular transit customer.

In the Fine Tradition of Finding Any Excuse

Maybe you've already devised and held on to your excuse for why public transportation doesn't work for you: I have a company car, so I don't have a monthly payment; I'm the anomaly that likes traffic, it helps me think; I'm reimbursed for my mileage, so it doesn't cost me anything to drive, etc.

But here's the deal. Let's say you don't pay for your own car—stop bragging, because you're still stuck in traffic. And by chance you actually like traffic (which says to me, you're just trying to be difficult), wouldn't you be able to think more efficiently if you're not pumping the brakes at the same time?

...how much more do you need to see—
how many more benefits do there need to be—
before you jump in?

I know change is tough. Nobody likes change—especially when it's voluntarily taking you out of your comfort zone. But how much more do you need to see—how many more benefits do there need to be—before you jump in?

Get on the Right Thing

This is a challenge. That's right, I'm throwing down! When it's not too cold to walk a few blocks to a bus stop (another excuse) and when it's light enough outside for you to feel comfortable walking in a strange area of town (and another excuse), leave your car at home and try transit once a month. Then, try transit twice a month, and then once a week.

And after a couple months, you'll find yourself looking forward to something different, something that makes a difference, something that helps you relax, something new, something exciting. You'll find yourself encouraging others to try transit. And then you'll find yourself organizing a Try Transit day in your office. I hope you do anyway.

There are always excuses, and you can keep your excuses as long as you realize you're part of the problem—and that you'll remain part of the problem until you change your lifestyle and join the solution.

It's time to put your butt in the *right* seat. 🚲

...you'll find yourself looking forward to something different, something that makes a difference, something that helps you relax, something new, something exciting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Barton is a curious, eager, overzealous, can't-say-no marketing, advertising, social media and public relations entrepreneur. His venture, [Rhyno Marketing](#), is his vehicle to promoting new marketing channels, new ways of thinking, and new ways of being new. His passion for public transportation can be credited to two things: 1) his disdain for all the inherent qualities of traffic and 2) working exclusively with public transportation agencies for three years. His current work-in-progress, *Butts in Seats*, will dissect the public transportation industry, its niche qualities and how current marketing tactics can be used to promote a transit brand. Look for updates at rhynoblogger.blogspot.com.

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