

Nottingham City Transport

Listening and learning

Deep in Robin Hood country (some Yorkshire Tykes would dispute that Nottingham has any right to this title), there's a bus company that is bang on target.

Nottingham City Transport is a municipal bus company owned (at arms-length) by Nottingham City Council (82%) and the French transport group, Transdev (18%). Last year's financial results (to 31 March 2003) are startling: turnover up 7% to £36.6 million, operating profit up 183.7% to £3.4 million, and pre-tax profit up 309% to £2.8 million. Profit per employee was also up - by 310%.

Better still, for a city council pledged to radically improve local transport, decades of decline have been brought to a halt. For the last two years NCT's patronage has increased by 1.5% year on year, and on certain routes it is up by a quarter.

In the last three years, NCT has replaced nearly one-third of its entire fleet, investing heavily in 116 new vehicles, including some articulated single deckers. Average fleet age stands at six years, and 64% of the fleet is now low-floor.

The remarkable turnaround in Nottingham City Transport's fortunes is no accident. It is all down to research, preparation and planning. Nicola Tidy, NCT's Marketing and Communications Director, is very clear about how the changes have been brought about.

In 2000, NCT adopted a fresh strategy. After watching competitor Trent Barton drive off with numerous awards, including Bus Operator of the Year, NCT's directors found they needed to face



NCT's Go2 services have shown growth of over three per cent a year, and on some services it is as high as 25%.

up to mounting unsustainable operating losses in a company that had changed little in 20 years. NCT's new approach is simplicity itself:

- To reverse the decline in passenger numbers
- To get existing passengers to travel on NCT more often
- To attract new passengers,

outside the bus industry, started by asking passengers what they wanted. The answer was loud and clear: improved reliability, more frequent services, simpler information, better buses and friendly helpful staff. These research results, although hardly surprising, focused minds at NCT by showing



Investment has been made in a variety of new vehicles including articulated Wright bodied Scania's.

especially commuters. Nicola, who has a strong background in marketing gained

exactly what it was failing to deliver.

In September 2001, NCT re-invented itself as a modern bus company. Out went a network of

routes put together at a time of low car ownership and very different travel to work patterns. In came a new network, a new corporate image, a new core fleet brand, and new ways of doing business.

The new network is considerably simplified. Non-viable routes have been withdrawn and cross-city services stopped. Colour coding has been applied across buses, stops and all publicity materials. Interchange points in the city centre have been improved, and a City Loop service introduced.

The jewel in NCT's new crown is a series of 14 commuter routes called Go2, new tram-like bus services that offer fast, direct routes into the city using bus priority lanes and 10-minute daytime frequencies. Other features include midnight departures, new low-floor buses, and the

colour-coded livery. Nicola's marketing expertise was critical in the way that Go2 was designed and promoted. Working from detailed passenger research, Go2 was deliberately developed to appeal to non-bus users. It is a simple, modern proposition with distinctive branding, differentiated not just

from other operators in the city but from the rest of NCT's fleet as well.

The launch programme was extensive, using slogans like "shop till you drop", "paint the town red", and especially for the workers "bring home the bacon". Local press, billboards, 125,000 customer newsletters, bus sides, and radio were all deployed for maximum penetration and impact. At the same time, new internet-

based marketing activity was rolled out, alongside brand new publicity material, public relations activity,

and tailor-made communications with specific local businesses.

Before the network changes were finalised, NCT launched a massive public consultation and communication campaign, using local press, radio and television, its own call centre and travel centre. NCT has also made a point of talking with local businesses and employers. As part of this dialogue, NCT approached the key staff with transport planning functions in local firms to find out how the bus could help them meet their goals. New network briefings were produced targeted at employees in these firms, and journey planning advice sessions are now regularly provided by Nicola's five-strong customer service team on site at larger employers, in retail centres and in hospitals.

Nottingham's Commuter Planners Club, established in 1995, is a partnership between the City



Nottingham Express Transit, Nottingham's 100% low floor tram system, started running this week from Hucknall, through Bulwell and Hyson Green and into the city centre. It also has a spur line to Phoenix Park, adjacent to junction 26 of the M1. The route has 23 stops and links with six park and ride sites at Hucknall, Bulwell, Moor Bridge, Phoenix Park, Wilkinson Street and The Forest.

wants to use the proceeds to fund transport improvements, especially Lines Two and Three of the tram.

are promotional campaigns to persuade people to try out the bus or the train, public relations

newspaper.

NCT is also pursuing more hi-tech solutions to making the bus the



No less than 64% of the fleet is now low floor, bringing accessibility benefits to Nottingham's passengers.

and County Councils, over 50 local businesses and employers (who between them employ about 50,000 people), plus local public transport operators. It is seen as the local forum where all aspects of travel planning, with particular reference to travel to work and on business, are raised, problems shared and so on. NCT raised the proposed network changes at the Club, and as Nicola Tidy puts it: "At a time of enormous changes, we realised just how valuable this Club is."

The Commuter Planners Club is serviced by Nottingham City Council's Transport Partnership Officer, Jeremy Prince: "It provides an accreditation process for employers' travel plans, which ensures consistency." The Club is now a key focus for debate about the proposed Workplace Parking Levy, which is scheduled to go to a formal public enquiry in early 2005. The City Council is hoping to introduce the Levy in 2006, and

One of the new initiatives to emerge is The Big Wheel, designed to promote public transport. There



NCT is aiming to attract commuters from cars onto its services. Here, a reminder of who the competition is appears on one of the company's own stops.

activities to suggest alternatives to always travelling by car, and travel awareness items in the local

mode of choice in a modern city. For example, there is NCT's NextBus system which provides "times by text", journey planning through mobile phones. The Attain NextBus software was developed by Nottingham Trent University, with NCT and Nottingham City Council funding, and allows the ACIS real-time bus information system to be used to send actual bus times by text messages to mobile phones. At last November's Bus Industry Awards 2003, it achieved Highly Commended in the Schlumbergersema Eureka! Award for successful initiatives that break new ground in promoting the bus. Over 2,500 messages are being sent per month, and on the Go2 Route 11, where the ACIS system is being tried out, patronage is up.

Smartcard technology, based on the Myfare standard with Almex machines in the buses, is in place and fully operational. 90,000 smartcards have been issued since 2000: 30,000 to replace conces-



The colourful branding is part of a massive publicity effort that encourages passengers to identify with the NCT product.

operator



Go2 services employ buses of a variety of sizes ranging from the Optare Solo upwards.

sionary fares passes, 60,000 BusCards, and 3,000 to Nottingham Trent University students. The latter smartcard also serves as a photo-ID and electronic pass into the University library and other facilities.

All of this is about to be repackaged as the EasyRider card, a non-bus generic name, that allows inter-operability with the new tram.

Nottingham Express Transit (NET), which is part-owned by NCT, is due to launch NET Line One on 9th March 2004, linking Hucknall with the city centre.

Payment for the smartcards can be made by direct debit, credit card, switch, over the internet, or (via an old-fashioned queue) in cash at NCT's travel centre. The new card will offer people a tailor-made, site-

specific, special monthly deal, backed up with journey planning advice. "It will be a bit of a package", says Nicola, "making using public transport as easy and as simple as possible".

At the other end of the ticketing spectrum, there is always the humble non-electronic scratchcard, marketed locally as the Kangaroo ('Hop on, Hop off...bus, train or tram'). Over 60 bus and rail operators have agreed to accept this all-day ticket, which costs £3.20, or an extra £2.00 on your normal fare if you are travelling from outside the city.

By supporting employers' travel planning initiatives, and other wider journey planning and travel awareness activities, NCT has



The NextBus 'times by text' system enables users to key in from a stop for real-time service information.

system and working in schools, to re-build social responsibility towards public transport.

It is fascinating to see just how far NCT has travelled, from being an inward-looking outfit constantly under seige, to its current position of active participant in a thriving city



A new Scania East Lancs OmniDekka in the Navy blue Go2 livery at Gotham.

benefitted significantly. It is now moving on to try to change perceptions about the bus in other areas: working with a shire county police force, to gain acceptance that it must find the resources to tackle vandalism and personal security issues on a metropolitan bus

environment. Partnership and communication were not previously management buzz-words: they are now.

By Richard Armitage of the Richard Armitage Transport Consultancy Ltd.



Over 90,000 smartcards have already been issued. The latest ones are interoperable with the tram.

Further information:

- Nottingham City Transport www.nctx.co.uk
- NET (Nottingham Express Transit) www.thetram.net
- Nottingham TravelWise Service www.itsnottingham.info
- The Big Wheel www.thebigwheel.org.uk