

Making Transit FUN!



How to Entice Motorists
from Their Cars *(and onto their
feet, a bike,
or bus)*



Darrin Nordahl

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1. The Fun Theory

Transportation is not an end—it is a means to having a better life, a more enjoyable life.

—Enrique Peñalosa, former Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia

Swings are appearing at bus stops in London and on trains in San Francisco. A bright red slide in Berlin whooshes passengers from the ticket station to a train plat-

form two stories below. A similar slide in Holland, dubbed a “transfer accelerator,” helps train passengers in Utrecht make their next connection. Bus stops designed to look like giant inhabitable strawberries, oranges, and melons add whimsy to sidewalks in Isahaya, Japan. And catchy jingles heard during television commercials in Columbia, Missouri, remind citizens of the childlike pleasures of bicycling.

Throughout the world, imaginative transit campaigns, accessories, and circulators are being devised to woo the entrenched motorist. The common denominator in each of these strategies is a single, positive emotion: joy. Joy helps transit compete against the allure of the automobile. And joy may be the quickest way to erase the persistent stigma of getting around without a car. Though the automobile has garnered a negative reputation among city planners, environmentalists, climatologists, and even some politicians, there is a diverse team of creative people whose job is to guarantee cars remain cool, chic, and fun for the masses. The best and brightest industrial designers, advertising executives, product engineers, graphic artists, and even songwriters work together to make the automobile the most compelling and enjoyable transportation option for today’s city dweller. They know what excites us. We need this same talent to carry out what many consider “mission impossible”: Create public transit that is as appealing as the automobile, if not more so.

Look, here in America, we love our cars. But transit? Not so much. In fact, most in this country find walking, biking, or riding the bus a deplorable means of getting around the city, reserved for those hard on their luck. I do not mean to offend my transit planning friends, but with few exceptions, transit in North America is hopelessly dull. How can we expect people to *want* to ride the bus when it is the homeliest vehicle on the road, offering the most ordinary of experiences? How can we expect people to walk to the store when our streets are ugly and hostile? Or to pedal bicycles along these ugly and hostile streets, with nothing more than a four-inch-wide stripe, at best, separating them from speeding cars, semis, and those homely buses?

Transit needs help. This is a call to the most inventive architects, interior designers, urban designers, graphic artists, industrial engineers, marketing experts, IT professionals, sculptors, musicians, and even fashion designers to join trans-

portation planners in creating urban mobility with compulsion. Transit needs to be convenient, safe, and reliable, to be sure, but it would be attractive to many more if it were also enjoyable. The *fun factor*—inherent in the automobile—is what is missing in public transit today.

“Whoa!!!” you say. “That’s not the only thing missing in public transit. What about money? How can we afford *fun* transit without *funding*?” You’re right. It is extremely difficult to institute effective transportation options—fun or otherwise—without adequate funding. But here is where we transit advocates need to take a lesson from Corporate America: you cannot get sufficient numbers of people to buy a product or service if it doesn’t excite them. You need better marketing, better packaging, and better design to entice consumers. We are competing against automobile manufacturers for market share. We need to snare *brand loyalty*, as McDonald’s or Coca-Cola would say, so that we gain customers for life. We need products and services that seduce consumers to our side. But when it comes to transportation with allure, the automobile currently has the bus, bike, and sidewalk beat seven ways from Sunday.

Here is the dilemma, as I see it. The automobile industry and its associated infrastructure are heavily subsidized, while budgets are routinely cut for transit. Why? Because people love cars. We love their style and we love what cars represent, namely status, American culture, and freedom. So, we lobby vigorously to preserve our status, our culture, and those perceived freedoms. Only when transit snares popular affection will people fight for it. It isn’t a matter of providing masses of buses; it’s a matter of making buses appealing to the masses. But right now, no one is fighting to preserve the experience of riding the bus.

Funding for transit might always be difficult to secure. But it will be even more difficult if transit continues to feel like a second-class choice to motorists. However, even in the face of today’s shrinking budgets, resourceful transit agencies are luring people out of their cars through creative marketing, attractive packaging, and smarter spending. These folk are bent on creating urban mobility with great appeal—something worth fighting for. This is not an easy task. But it illustrates the need to design public transit alternatives that truly excite the public, alternatives that tug our heartstrings while loosening our purse strings.

Emotion vs. Reason

If people behaved entirely rationally, we would have foregone our cars long ago. After all, transit is much safer than automobiles. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, almost forty thousand people are killed each year in the United States in automobile-related crashes. Transit is also better for our health. Fewer cars on the road mean fewer harmful emissions, and cleaner air for us to breathe. And transit riders, by nature, are physically active, having to walk or cycle some distance to get to the train station or bus stop. You see fewer obese people living in Vancouver, New York, Tokyo, or Amsterdam than in cities where automobiles are the only transportation option. Transit is also better for the environment, and increasingly, people are seeking ways to reduce their ecological imprint. Yet gas-guzzlers such as four-wheel-drive SUVs are still immensely popular, even under the threats of climate change and peak oil.

But the surest reason we should forgo automobiles should be cost. After all, money is the biggest motivator of behavior. Or is it? “Once gasoline reaches \$5 per gallon,” we have long been warned, “we will see a mass exodus from the interiors of our cars.” Guess what? We are nearly there. Current gasoline prices are well over \$4 a gallon in many metropolitan areas, with no sign of motorist exodus. *Care2*, the 18-million-member social networking site that connects environmental and social activists around the world, posed the “\$5 question” to its members. When asked if \$5 per gallon gasoline would get them to use public transit, only 17 percent responded “yes.”¹⁰ And these are folks bent on living healthier and greener!

Even when gasoline is less than \$3 per gallon, it is far cheaper to ride transit than to own and maintain a car. In January 2010, when the national average price for a gallon of gas was just \$2.75, the American Public Transportation Station issued a media advisory stating that riding transit will save individuals \$9,242 each year¹¹

“We Americans have shown consistently that we will make almost any sacrifice for our cars,” exclaims David Owen, a journalist for *The New Yorker*. “We will pay horrifying prices for fuel and insurance, we will cut back on almost all other expenditures, including health care, we will endure extreme expense and inconvenience related to parking, and we will commute over distances that once

would have struck almost anyone as inconceivable, if not insane.”^[3] Against sound reasons of safety, environmental health, and personal wealth, we still drive. People simply love their cars. And as we all know, love and reason are like oil and water.

Of course, there are other ways we can get motorists out of their cars. We can coerce people to walk, bike, or ride the bus by making driving torturous. Owen offers such a solution in his popular book *Green Metropolis*: “Cities should be thinking of ways to make life harder for the least efficient automobile commuters—perhaps by requiring solo drivers to use congested, slower-moving lanes restricted to cars without multiple passengers, and charging them tolls to do so—with a view to eventually prompting those drivers to give up and join a carpool or take a bus.”^[4]

Owen considers New York City the American exemplar of public transportation policy, precisely because driving is so frustrating there. “New Yorkers don’t ride the subway because they’re more enlightened or more environmentally aware than other Americans,” Owen contends, “New Yorkers ride the subway because owning and driving a car in the city is almost ridiculously disagreeable.”^[5]

How’s that for incentive? Let’s make driving such an exercise in futility that transit looks appealing. Some may chuckle over the apparent absurdity of this transportation strategy, but this is exactly what Europe is doing. Strategies vary from city to city, but the urban policy is the same: irk drivers to the point they cry “Uncle!” In London, drivers are levied a heavy toll to drive into the central city; Copenhagen is banning cars from some streets and removing parking spaces from others. Speed limits are as slow as twelve miles an hour in Zurich, and stoplights are being added to ensure motorists maintain a snail’s pace.

For communities with incredibly high densities, implementing driver-unfriendly policies—though controversial even in Europe—is more agreeable because driving is already so disagreeable. Similar strategies are already at work on this side of the pond, in San Francisco and New York City, the two densest communities on each coast. Both cities are removing travel lanes to accommodate bike lanes, commandeering parking spaces for makeshift sidewalk seating, and eschewing through-traffic to create pedestrian plazas.

But what of all those cities in between, those that are not very dense, where it is seemingly illogical *not* to drive? What do we do until such time Oklahoma

City, Albuquerque, Omaha, El Paso, Jacksonville, Raleigh, Kansas City, Colorado Springs, Fresno, and other cities with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants develop to the densities that make driving so cumbersome? And how many councilors and mayors will campaign on a platform of making driving a torturous endeavor in their community? How many citizens will vote for such policies? Because of our culture and our love affair with the automobile, many believe making driving so painful is just, well, *un-American* (even if it does prove to be the most rational strategy to get people out of their cars).

When density and logic are not enough to sway the motorist, we need to re-think how to attract folks to transit. There needs to be a better incentive to explore alternative means of mobility than the lesser-of-two-evils philosophy (“Gosh, driving here really sucks . . . I guess I’ll take the bus”). There should be a *positive* incentive, one that lures motorists because the experience of walking, biking, or straphanging is actually pleasurable.

Enter emotion. What if riding transit was not only a logical, “no-brainer” decision, but also a truly pleasurable experience? Emotion is more powerful than reason when persuading people to change their behavior. Reason and emotion often work at odds, like the angel and devil on every person’s shoulder. Transportation engineering necessarily involves a lot of reason. But it currently lacks emotion. This is what the automobile industry has so effectively exploited. Transit needs to beat the automobile at its own game. If we want to lure motorists out of their cars, we have to bait them with delight.

The Fun Theory

TheFunTheory.com is a popular website that poses a simple question: Can fun change people’s behavior for the better? A string of intriguing video clips, which have become quite popular on *YouTube*, convincingly demonstrates that an otherwise unpopular task could be made popular if it is fun to do. Recycling glass bottles, for example, becomes more appealing when the bin is transformed into a type of arcade game. Recyclers rack up points based on their dexterity in shoving bottles through the bin openings, challenging others to beat their score. (Over one

evening, the bottle bank arcade was used by nearly one hundred people. During that same period, the nearby conventional bottle bank was used twice.) Littering is reduced when rubbish bins emit whimsical sounds, like that of an object falling into an abyss and landing with a distant thud. (A specially rigged rubbish bin collected almost 160 pounds of trash in one day, almost twice as much as the typical “silent” bin just a short distance away.) And speeding can be curbed with the introduction of speed camera lotteries. Like a typical speed camera, the license plates of speeding motorists are photographed, and the owner of the car is mailed a citation. But the camera also photographs law-abiding motorists, who are then automatically entered into a lottery to win money from those lawbreaker’s citations. In other words, drive legally, win cash. (Along one busy street in Stockholm, the speed camera lottery reduced average motorist speed from 32 km/h to 25 km/h, a 22 percent reduction).

One of the most provocative experiments conducted by The Fun Theory is a piece entitled [“Piano Stairs.”](#)⁽⁶⁾ The group asks the question, “Can we get more people to choose the stairs over the escalator by making it fun?”

Engineers set out to test this hypothesis, and outfitted the stair treads leading from an underground transit station in Stockholm with a series of black and white pressure-sensitive sensors. The result is a convincing transformation of an ordinary stairway into a fully functional piano keyboard. As one steps on each stair, the corresponding note is played. The young, the old, and the middle-aged found this interactive stairway utterly captivating, with people composing unique tunes simply by stair-stepping. And they do more than walk up the stairs. They hop, sidestep, and dance their way from the platform to the sidewalk. (Dogs are especially fun, because their four fleet feet create music with unusually upbeat tempos.) The result of this innovative stairway renovation dramatically increased its use: 66 percent more people than normal chose the stairs over the escalator (with the likelihood of a 100 percent increase in smiles).

What is perhaps most surprising about these experiments is not so much the results, but the group behind them. The Fun Theory is an initiative of one of the largest car manufacturers in the world: Volkswagen. Then again, maybe the fact that automobile manufacturers understand quite well the influence joy has on

people's behavior—any behavior, whether it is slanted toward recycling, cleaner sidewalks, safety, or mobility—shouldn't come as a surprise. After all, they have been making vehicles with verve and panache for over a century—vehicles that, unlike mass transit, truly do appeal to the masses.

Car manufacturers have long capitalized on the joy that seems inherent with owning and operating an automobile. BMW aired a number of commercials during the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, highlighting the giddy pleasure of driving. Each commercial concluded with various slogans such as, “Joy is timeless,” “Joy is futureproof,” and “Joy is always in season.” The company's website recently featured a dozen other slogans, all leading with “Joy.” BMW even tried to connect the pleasure of driving with environmental responsibility with the slogan “Joy is faster reactions—with lower emissions.” These slogans are individual components of a collective, singular realization that, according to the car manufacturer, “Joy is BMW.” In other words, joy and the automobile are synonymous, interchangeable, one and the same. (Well, as long as that car is a BMW, anyway.)

Emotion is serious business for automakers, and not just those in Germany. Infiniti—the luxury division of Nissan—employs what it calls a *master driver*, who, according to the carmaker, is “recognized by the Ministry of Japan for his extraordinary skill.”^[7] A more apt job title might be *emotion engineer*, because this person's sole task is to provide the design team with real human feedback. The master driver takes note of things like changes in pulse, giddiness, and thrill; human responses that computers cannot measure. His feedback is invaluable because it means, in the words of Infiniti, “the difference between being physically transported and emotionally moved.”^[8]

What has become very clear in the automotive world is the power positive emotion wields over a person's choice. While joy seems to be a dominant word in the language of carmakers, the transit industry often focuses on words such as *function, usefulness, safety, convenience, and accessibility*. These are all important words, no doubt. But what are lacking in the transit vocabulary are nouns of positive emotion: *delight, allure, pleasure, exhilaration, and compulsion*.

What if we were to assume the hypothesis posed by The Fun Theory, and in so doing, turn the tables on carmakers? In other words, can we get more people to choose transit over the automobile by making it fun?

Endnotes

1. Care2's online survey, which as of February 11, 2012, had over 3,000 respondents, can be found here: <http://www.care2.com/polls/vote?pollID=10155&results=1> (last accessed March 22, 2012).
2. American Public Transportation Association, "Riding Public Transit Saves Individuals \$9,242 Annually," January 12, 2010, http://www.apta.com/mediacenter/pressreleases/2010/Pages/100112_Transit_Savings.aspx (last accessed March 22, 2012).
3. David Owen, *Green Metropolis: Why Living Smaller, Living Closer, and Driving Less Are the Keys to Sustainability* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 133.
4. *Ibid.*, 143.
5. *Ibid.*, 122.
6. http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=2lXh2n0aPyw (last accessed March 22, 2012).
7. This quote was taken from an Infiniti television ad. The script can be read here: <http://www.edgestudio.com/script/11066> (last accessed March 22, 2012).
8. Infiniti USA, "Explore Infiniti—About Infiniti," http://www.infinitiusa.com/cirquedusoleil/explore_infiniti/about.html (last accessed March 22, 2012).