23rd October 2004 (revised version of original 13th June 2000 paper).

PUBLIC TRANSPORT AND TOURISM

# INFOSTRUCTURE; SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT AND TOURISM

## Introduction

The genesis of this paper lies in Phases 1 & 2 of the European-funded Sustainable Transport for Tourism Wales (STTW) marketing campaign administered by a panel of tourism, environment and transport experts. Details of this campaign and the expertise called upon to implement it are contained in the Campaign Report Phase 2 1998–2001. During the second phase it became increasingly clear that integrated transport systems are unsustainable unless provision is first made for the collection, processing and timely delivery to consumers of integrated information. This fundamental principle can now be more fully addressed against the background of convergence taking place between telecommunications and web technology. From this convergence comes the notion of 'infostructure'.

## Information as a Commodity

Information is now recognised as a commodity, as important to the product it describes as the product itself. Where the product is a service, information is invariably used to describe them more in terms of space and time, e.g. the train leaving platform 2 is the 3 o'clock to Manchester, and becomes an integral part of the product itself. A service product such as the one described above has, to all intents and purposes, an extremely short lifespan – once the train has left the platform it is no more on that day. Information about it is therefore critical and becomes an extension of the product itself. Railway timetables and information displays at railway stations are prime examples.

## Valuing Information

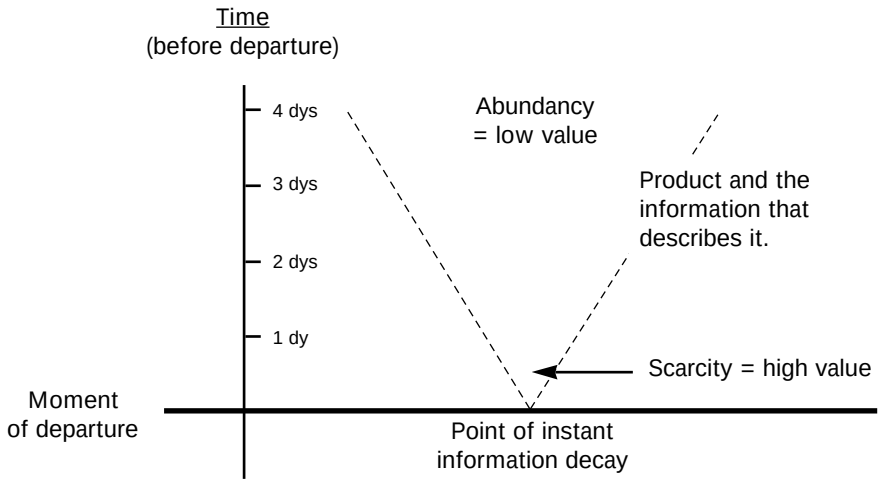
The value of information varies in accordance with the proximity or availability of the product it describes, and the accuracy and integrity of the information used to describe it. In all cases the real value of information is suggested by the amount of effort required to search it out and the outcome of acting on it.

Given demand as a constant, the more abundant a commodity, the less its value. As commodities become scare, their value increases. Where time and space is of the essence, the value of information is governed by the same law. With plenty of time available to search out information, no urgent thought or great effort is made by consumers to obtain it. Where little time is available, consumers will go out of their way to obtain information and are often willing to pay for it. It is more important to know today, with considerable accuracy, that there's a train leaving in two hours time than to know the previous week that there is a train.

Inaccessibility and inaccuracy of information can lead to buses/trains being missed and from this comes the notion of perishability (see diagram 'Product Perishability/Information Decay'). As explained earlier, once the bus or train has departed, it is no more and the information that described it has decayed. The effect this has on value, using the abundancy/scarcity principle and assuming a commitment to public transport by the consumer in the first place, is shown in the figure below headed *Product Perishability/Information Decay.*

In a fast-moving world, where the frequency of short break taking is increasing and lead times are shortening, well-thought-out information products, geared to lifestyle and delivered just in time, are likely to be well received by consumers, particularly when delivered under trusted brands.

**Product Perishability/Information Decay**




## Consumers as Suppliers

The dividing line between consumers and suppliers has become blurred as access to powerful information tools has enabled consumers to take on the role of suppliers. Nowhere is this in greater evidence than in the travel market. In this market, consumers traditionally perceived travel information to be available free at their high street travel agent. To the industry, however, the cost and wastage was considerable and was passed on in prices.

With product information increasingly available now to consumers online, empowering them to make direct and later bookings, consumers themselves are replacing this part of the supply chain, enabling operators to make considerable savings in print, distribution and high street presence. These savings are then passed on by reducing prices, resulting in increased competition (and, in theory, increased product sales). Consumers are no doubt taking risks in this new e-commerce area but the rewards are worthwhile.

As regards market share, it will be those operators that can, in addition to reduced prices, can guarantee the accuracy and integrity of the content they display, the ease and speed by which it is accessible, and the speed and security of their transaction processes, as that will stand to gain the most in the long run. The value of information as a commodity is becoming clearer; moreso with the coming of third generation mobile telephony and the advent of m-commerce.

## Infostructure

The biggest drawback in the production and timely delivery of information products relating to travel by public transport is, however, the availability of raw material to work from. Public transport information provision tends to be localised, geared more to necessary use by consumers to commute to work, travel to school, or for community leisure purposes, rather than use by visitors. There was until recently little imperative for local operators to make information available further afield and even less to integrate transport modes to make life easier for consumers. On the contrary, different forms of public transport saw themselves in competition with one another and unwilling to share their information and users.

What has been overlooked for many years is the large potential market available through working together to develop the visitor market where the main competition is the car. With the denationalisation of the railways, the granting of train operater franchises covering large swathes of the country, including a single franchise for Wales, the rationalisation of train and bus operators into same holding companies, the pressure from government to reduce reliance on the motor car, and the technical means now at our fingertips to micro market, there comes a substantial opportunity to organise the collection and to integrate the delivery of public transport travel information geared to the visitor market in the UK, Europe and internationally.

Doing so will not only enable greater penetration of this market but is bound also to have a positive knock-on effect on domestic services and facilities, improving the lot of local users and the well-being of communities in general. Developing the infostructure is likely to play a significant part in helping train and bus operators to reduce costs, develop new revenue streams and to improve services in general.