

Winning Back Ridership in the Aftermath of COVID-19

optibus



The New Normal

In the first months of the pandemic, fears of COVID-19 transmission on public transportation, along with lockdowns and remote work, converged to bring our constantly moving mass transit networks to a grinding halt.

Ridership dropped over 80% in cities around the world, including London, New York, San Francisco and Singapore.

Travel patterns have changed or are in flux, and one year later, ridership concerns remain.

New commuting habits and health standards have created a “new normal” with a questionable timeline for reviving pre-pandemic ridership.

There are several changes we must contend with now:

- People aren't going to the same **places** they used to
- People aren't going there the same **days or times** they used to
- People aren't getting to their destinations the same **way** they used to

These changes mean that even passengers who used to take public transit on a daily basis may need to be won over all over again. It's more important than ever to show past, present and potential future passengers that public transit is not only a safe transportation option but also a reliable one, with high quality of service that is flexible and adaptive enough to meet current demand – even as that demand continues to shift.

But what exactly can we expect will happen with public transit ridership in the coming months?

We polled about 400 industry professionals to find out what they thought and spoke to a panel of transportation industry experts with experience at Transport for London (TfL), the International Association of Public Transport (UITP), TransitCenter and NICE Bus earlier this year to discuss the greatest issues facing public transportation as the world begins to pull out of the pandemic, what threatens ridership revival, and tactics and timelines for recovery. Here are the results.



Timeline for Recovery

Getting passengers back on board is the greatest issue for the public transportation industry in 2021.

Ridership has dropped drastically during the pandemic due to fear of COVID-19 transmissions, changes in travel habits due to lockdowns and remote work, and resulting service changes to protect drivers' and passengers' health and observe social distancing.

Bringing that ridership back is by far the biggest concern for this year, garnering 63% of respondent votes. (Survey results and panelist quotes are from an Optibus webinar in late January 2021.)

Ridership concerns greatly surpassed all other issues facing the transportation industry this year. Even the second most common concern – financial issues, which threaten the collapse of operators and agencies worldwide – trailed in comparison, with 34% of the votes.

Though health concerns were at the root of the changes wrought by the pandemic, they ranked even lower, followed by maintaining or improving the level of service.

What are your biggest concerns for 2021?

(Respondents could select multiple answers)



The timeline for ridership to return to pre-pandemic levels is debatable.

About a quarter of respondents said they doubt ridership will ever return to pre-pandemic levels.

“The high-water mark of passenger ridership has passed us,” said Leon Daniels, who served as the managing director of surface transport at Transport for London (TfL) for seven years.

Daniels cited the termination of social distancing requirements as a potential starting point for seeing ridership numbers recover, but was wary about just how significant those improvements will be. "If we get 70% of our bus ridership back, we will have done really well. Certainly, I don't see it improving beyond that in the short term."

The remaining three-quarters of survey respondents were less pessimistic, saying they do expect ridership to return to pre-COVID levels.

However, they were split on what that timeline looks like. Forty-four percent expected it to take at least two years and 26% said it would take less than two years.

Only 7% expect levels to return to normal by the end of 2021.

2 How long do you think it will take ridership to return to pre-COVID levels?



Transport providers should focus on service quality, not just reviving ridership.

While survey respondents expressed concern over getting back to a pre-pandemic ridership rate, panelists said ridership numbers are not necessarily the best benchmark of successful public transportation.

"In transportation, this is not like a sales target," said Daniels. "Our job in public transportation is to carry all the people who want to travel. And so ridership in and of itself isn't actually the prime goal here."

Chris Van Eyken, a transportation planner and senior program associate at the New York-based think tank and advocacy group TransitCenter, also noted that while ridership numbers are important, they are not the "end-all, be-all" of public transportation.

Arno Kerkhof, head of the bus division at UITP, agreed, saying that ridership “is not an end in itself and is not the prime goal of public transportation.”

Rather, panelists suggested that maintaining and improving level of service should actually be the top priority, and could ultimately lead to increased ridership.

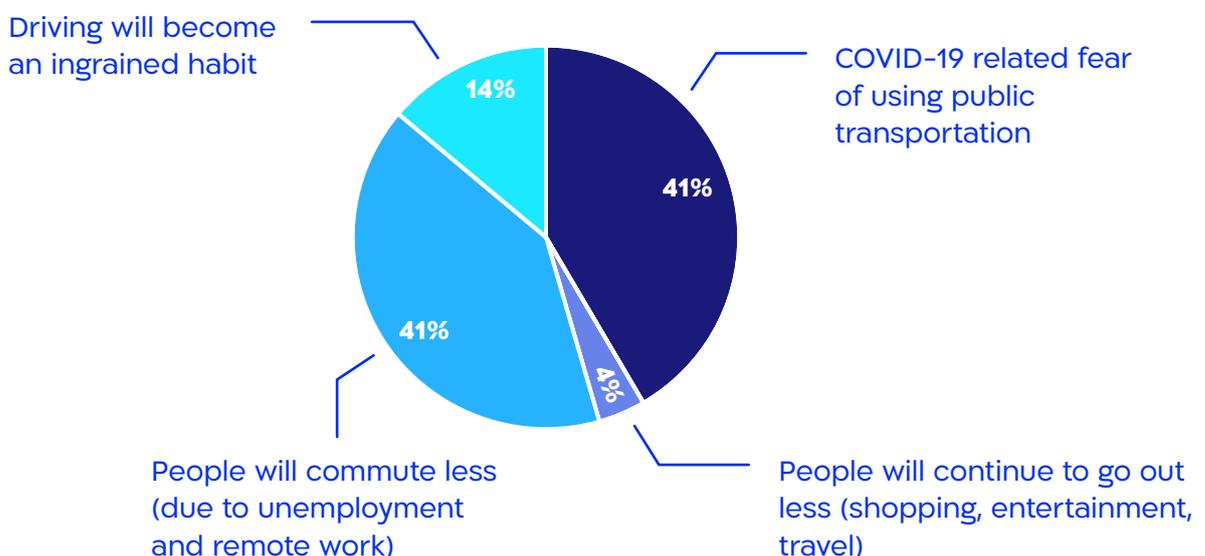
“Our jobs are to provide safe, reliable transportation on time with the speed and security that our customers need,” said Jack Khzouz, CEO of NICE Bus (Nassau Inter-County Express), a Transdev North America subsidiary and the primary bus system serving Nassau County, New York. “If we do that correctly, ridership will come back naturally. But if we focus on it, I think we are completely missing the target.”

Threats to Public Transportation

Health concerns and new commuting habits are expected to have the biggest negative impact on ridership in 2021.

Our survey found that the two greatest threats to public transportation in 2021 – tying at 41% of survey participants – are COVID-19 related fears of public transportation and pandemic-induced changes in commuting habits.

3 Which trend could have the biggest negative effect on ridership in 2021?



In the face of reduced public transportation usage, one big concern is that passengers could revert to personal vehicles to travel.

While only 14% of poll participants said that increased driving will have the biggest negative impact on ridership in 2021, panelists expressed major concerns about increased preference for private cars over mass transit. If realized, this stands to hurt not only the public transportation industry, but also efforts to reduce pollution and congestion.

According to Daniels, before the pandemic, many car-owners were on the cusp of giving in to the social pressure of decreasing their car usage and/or switching to public transportation. This was complemented by a generation of environmentally aware young people who are less car-dependent and savvier about alternatives to personal vehicles.

But amidst changing schedules and fears of transmission, the pandemic reversed this momentum.

“I’ve spent forty years of my life trying to get people out of cars and onto public transportation. And in the last year we just gave it all back. The last thing we possibly want is a car-led recovery,” Daniels said. “We have to work doubly, triply hard to get those people back out of their cars and onto public transportation.”

Van Eyken believes that providing high-quality services and playing up the advantages of public transportation over cars – such as a less stressful commute – will be key in winning back riders.

“Even in New York, it is sometimes quicker to take a car, but you take the subway just because it’s a better experience,” he said. “So I think we need to keep building those strengths to ensure that we don’t have a car-led recovery, because that will just be another crisis and climate change that we will have to deal with at some point as well.”

Recovery Tactics

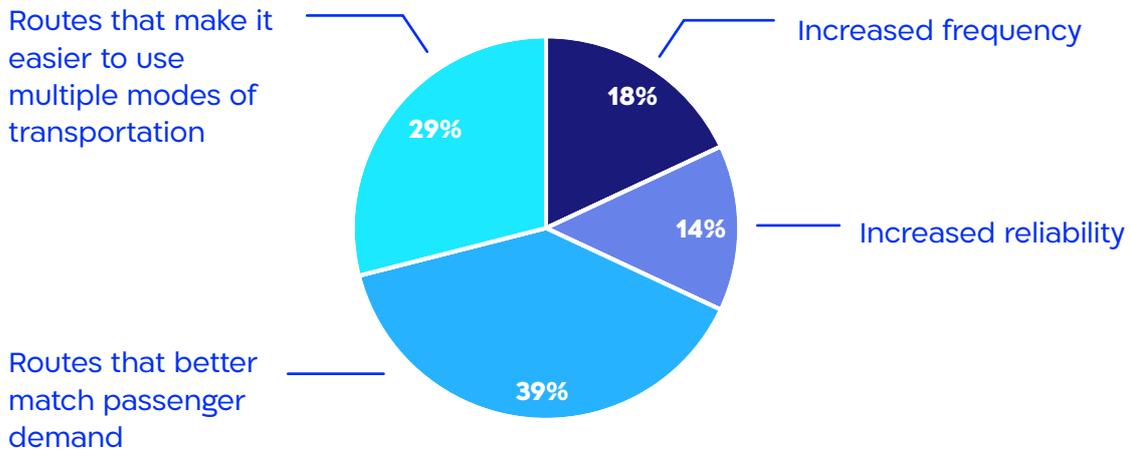
Improving quality of service can be an effective way of countering negative effects on ridership and making public transit the preferred mode of mobility.

Service improvements must account for the radical changes that have occurred over the past year due to pandemic. This will require adaptability and agility on behalf of all transportation providers seeking to stay relevant and survive the tides of change.

“We need to be able to provide what they need in the context of their lives right now,” Khzouz said. “Our lives have changed. We need to change with that.”

4

Which service change could have biggest POSITIVE effect on ridership in 2021?



According to 39% of respondents, the service change that will have the biggest positive effect on ridership in 2021 is routes that better match passenger demand.

“I think proper demand management has the potential to make the entire system more efficient,” said Van Eyken. “It will better serve riders who travel outside of the peaks currently. And that’s mostly our lower-income riders, communities of color. And if we can serve those communities better, I think it will make for more equitable systems. How we get to those demand management goals, it depends on the city and their current context.”

Other solutions include routes that make it easier to use multiple modes of transportation. For instance, planners looking at multiple networks, bike paths and scooter/bike docking stations on a map can more easily plan transfer points so passengers can make bus-bike or bus-train connections.

About one-third of respondents called for increased frequency or reliability.

Addressing COVID-19-related health and safety concerns – specifically cleanliness, passenger overcrowding and mask regulations – will also be key.

“At TransitCenter, we did a poll on focus groups last year and found that people just want to feel safe, first of all,” said Van Eyken.

To emphasize the health and safety of public transit, agencies and operators can continue to enforce the wearing of masks by passengers and drivers. They can also spotlight behind-the-scenes investments made in cleaning and disinfecting buses, surfaces, and stations, and even consider adopting these practices over the long term.

“Making the invisible visible can contribute in getting this trust and confidence back from the passengers,” said Kerkhof.

“I think the public will want to see that sort of cleaning regime carried on in the future, very visibly,” Daniels added.

What's Next

With these concerns and coping mechanisms in mind for dealing with pandemic-related transit issues, about three-quarters (74%) of panelists are optimistic that 2021 will be a better year for public transportation than 2020. But of those, the vast majority said it will still be worse than 2019.

A more pessimistic quarter (26%) did not expect any improvements in 2021, including 8% who actually expect 2021 to be even worse than 2020.

5 Which statement most reflects your expectations about public transportation in 2021?



The global transportation industry faces many challenges and unknowns in the coming months.

Jack Khzouz of NICE Bus emphasized the role of technology in relieving passenger anxiety and improving service quality.

For instance, crowding concerns can be mitigated by real-time load management and dispatching additional vehicles when demand spikes.

“If we figure out ways to stay relevant by using technology,” said Khzouz, “that’s what will keep us in the conversation.”

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Optibus is an AI platform that brings much-needed innovation to the essential mobility mode at the heart of our cities: public transportation. Optibus leverages a robust combination of artificial intelligence, advanced optimization algorithms and distributed cloud computing to make public transportation smarter, better and more efficient – and ultimately nourish freedom of movement and sustainable cities.

A cloud-native SaaS company founded in 2014, Optibus powers complex transit operations in over 450 cities around the world, planning and scheduling the movement of vehicles and drivers to improve the quality and reliability of transit service and make operations more efficient.

Optibus has been recognized by the World Economic Forum as a Technology Pioneer and by Gartner as a Cool Vendor. It has offices in London, Tel Aviv, New York, Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, London and São Paulo.

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