

# Use of Social Networking to promote public transport and sustainable travel

*John Austin looks at the way both public transport operators and local authorities are beginning to use Social Networking tools to convey positive and timely messages about the benefits of sustainable travel*

The huge growth of the Internet in the last ten years has been fuelled more recently by the explosion in Social Media website 'platforms'; and particularly Social Networking within that. There is a distinction between the two. While Social Media is a wide term covering Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content involving social interaction, Social Networking has a more obvious 'community' aspect to it. That aspect may actually dominate the activity on the application.

## **Social Networking explained**

Social Networking covers web applications that are created by individuals or organisations on a commercially-provided Internet 'platform', usually delivered to the user free, in order to interact with others through a virtual 'community'. Such a community is self-selecting - individuals apply to join and to link up with others - and there may also be a degree of 'trust' or validation involved before an individual is allowed to join a particular virtual community. Many of us will be members of 'Facebook' or almost certainly know somebody that is, and in our professional lives some will have joined 'Linkedin', which essentially has online CVs at its heart. Indeed, LTT's sister magazine, "*New Transit*", has a 'Facebook' page.

However, Social Networking goes farther than these two examples. It also encompasses message media (microblogs; such as Twitter.com), and can also encompass full-size blogs and online forums to which members of the community can add their comments. There are also other more general Social Media which may also be brought into a Social Networking 'community' environment through weblinks from the 'community's' website. These include the sharing of visual media such as photos (through, for instance, Flickr.com) and videos (e.g. through Vimeo.com). Increasingly, Social Networking applications are also migrating from internet websites to becoming available on mobile platforms. Some, such as Twitter.com, have been designed originally with mobile usage as a fundamental part of their rationale.

This article follows some of the research that Austin Analytics has recently been carrying out on the use of Social Networks to promote Public Transport, and also sustainable transport more generally.

## **Building Supportive Communities**

With the combination of rising operating costs and the economic recession public transport operators need new ways of raising revenue. One means of doing that is to use Social Networking to build a supportive community of users, to welcome and convert those internet-savvy users who are not yet 'supporters', and to use this community to spread the message that using public transport is 'cool'. A similar approach can be used for spreading a message that more sustainable modes generally, including walking, cycling, and car-sharing, are both realistic in terms of 21<sup>st</sup> century lifestyle and can promote a 'feel-good' factor.

As well as the promotional benefits, public transport operators can also use Social Networking simply to give timely information, but in a targeted and easily-digestible way. For some, 'Twitter' is becoming a major means of doing that. While the information-giving objective drives this, 'Twitter' also allows organisations to build a community (following Tweets themselves, and receiving 'retweets' from customers) and interact with that.

In the UK, while Social Networking is being increasingly used by public transport operators to convey timely information and promote the use of their brand, its use by local authorities to promote sustainable travel is quite patchy.

## ***Operators' use of Social Networking***

Currently there are about 50 UK bus operators with official Facebook or Twitter pages, there is heavy representation in the rail industry, and several of the Traveline regions also have Social Networking sites. A key word here is 'official' and one key characteristic of Facebook is that it is often quite difficult for the user to distinguish between official and unofficial pages, since any member of Facebook can set up any page about anything they like. Facebook also provides a range of different ways in which authors (including transport operators) can set up pages. These include: as a 'person' with whom the other Facebook users become 'friends'; as an organisation, whose page other Facebook users 'like; and as a 'group', which a Facebook user can join. There are examples of all three types of set-up amongst public transport operators' official Facebook presences.

In Twitter, by contrast, a user simply decides to 'follow' another Twitter 'person' (who, of course, may be an organisation). Twitter works by users 'tweeting' messages, which then go out to all their 'followers'. So a public transport customer can 'follow' the tweets of an operator, and in turn the operator can 'follow' the tweets of that customer; and thereby interactive communication can be established between operator and customer. Since Twitter is used by transport operators and sustainable travel promoters largely to give real-time updates and to convey timely promotional messages it does not appear to have a significant problem of 'unofficial' users appearing to the user to be 'official' ones.

Both Facebook and Twitter allow the forwarding of information to others in the network, so, for instance, a public transport operator may receive a tweet from an organisation it is following about an event which would generate traffic on that operator's network. It can then 'retweet' it, effectively as a promotional advert, to stimulate traffic on its network; as for instance, a train operator retweeting to its followers a tweet about a Raceday event at a location on its network, which it received from the Racecourse operators.

## ***Use by Local Authorities***

Several local authorities now have Facebook and Twitter pages, but these tend to cover the council's complete range of activities rather than just transport. However, they may in practise focus on transport because that is an area of local authority activity that is highly visible to the public, and is also of particular interest currently because of the development of local authorities' LTP3s. Whilst some authorities are using Twitter to give timely information to drivers about conditions on the road network (e.g. Buckinghamshire and City of Edinburgh), an interesting approach to promoting sustainable travel is currently being pioneered by Central Bedfordshire Council. It has created an interactive website at [www.letstalkcentral.com](http://www.letstalkcentral.com), in addition to the council's main website, in order to let residents have their say about the authority. The Transport service features prominently in this website, with a particular focus on the development of Myjourney, the new Central Bedfordshire LTP3, including advocacy of sustainable travel modes. This also has facilities for users to add content directly to the website, and in addition has links to a Twitter page exclusively about the LTP and also to a more general Facebook page.

'One-stop' integrated travel information and sustainable travel websites in the UK produced on behalf of local authorities and ITAs in urban or metropolitan areas do not at present generally include Social Networking features; Metro (West Yorkshire), Travel South Yorkshire and TfL being the main exceptions. One reason for this may be that it can be difficult to introduce such community engagement features unless they have been designed into the websites right from the start. However, the Generation M website produced for Metro in West Yorkshire, aimed at young people, has both Facebook and Twitter applications prominently displayed.

## ***Some pitfalls***

One characteristic of Social Networking applications is that they do require high and regular maintenance and very disciplined systems in order to weed out 'spam', remove destructive or negative comments (or at least neutralise them), and keep the pages looking fresh. This is

particularly the case with applications using blogs and comments, such as Facebook. The high maintenance aspect is perhaps one reason why some innovative operators have not yet adopted Social Networking, particularly if they already have extensive customer databases derived from pre-purchase ticket sales and can target customers directly by E-mail or SMS messages. There is perhaps a danger that if introduced without being very carefully planned and resourced Social Networking could lead to the inadvertent devaluing of a public transport brand which an operator has worked hard to build up. Pat Stringer, Commercial Manager of Brighton & Hove Buses, comments that while they continually watch other operators' Social Networking developments, and have carried out experiments with Facebook in the past, they do not consider that the time is currently right for them to introduce Social Networking themselves.

### ***Having Social Networking at the heart***

One interesting application of Social Networking to create a community that will support and grow rail travel is 'Trainspotterwanted'. This is a website with Facebook and Twitter applications that was created earlier this year to find an *"outgoing, creative, digital-media enthusiast with excellent communication skills"* to *"help spread the word that rail is an ideal way to travel, and planning and booking is about to get far simpler and more convenient"*. The successful candidate (now appointed) will be working for the new Quno online rail booking service, led by well-known digital rail ticketing expert Jeremy Acklam.

### ***Engaging with developer communities***

While not quite falling under the definition of Social Networking itself, engaging with the public directly through developer communities can also be a way of sustainable travel promoters and providers indirectly enabling Social Networking. In the USA BART (San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit), which serves an area with many technologically creative people, has deliberately engaged with the developer community to encourage new ITS applications to grow its business<sup>1</sup>. This in turn fosters communities of public transport 'supporters', which the transit authority can then engage with. BART has several visible expressions of this engagement. One example is BART's use of Flickr.com to gather photographs of actual passengers for publicity purposes, another is its use of a community of customers to test different designs for its new website.

### ***Finally***

Social Networking is a developing phenomenon, whose potential, benefits, and pitfalls will change as technology evolves. The 'viral' nature of the web means that both positive and negative user comments and experiences shared through Social Networking can quickly spread. But it is a phenomenon which those involved with promoting and delivering sustainable travel options should not ignore.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.bart.gov/developers>



Figure 1 Generation M Facebook page in support of sustainable travel options

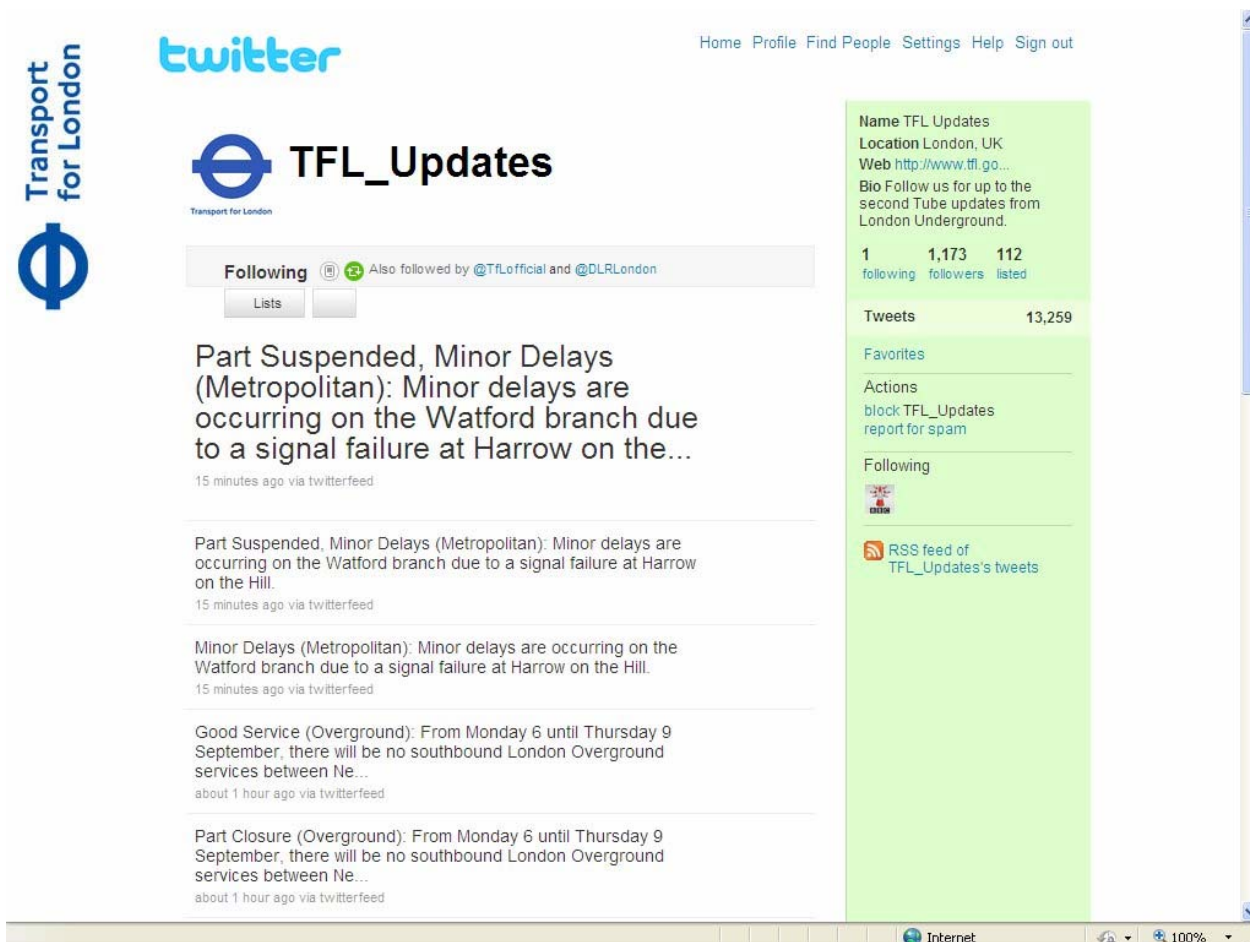


Figure 2 Tweet from 'TfL Updates' page