

Customer-Led Success Stories

# Transport for London

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# A story of Customer-led success Transport for London (TfL)

Follow [this link](#) for a summary of the framework explaining why customer-led success is so rare and the journey organisations go on to get there. Each story uses this framework so if you're not familiar with it or you want a reminder, it's worth reading this first to make sense of descriptions of terms like 'Burningness' and 'Moments of Belief' which are crucial

From the Second World War until the late 1980s, investment in public transport in London was limited, and much of the system fell into disrepair. Londoners avoided it because it was unreliable and expensive. But the creation of the mayoralty in 2000 alongside a decade of PPP-based capital investment in public transport meant that the network was being significantly improved just as London had started to boom again.

The twenty-first century has seen relentless growth in the UK's capital to a population of nine million people more enthusiastic about using, and so more reliant upon, public transport than almost any other city dwellers in the world. But despite high demand being in many ways a good thing, TfL's capacity is largely fixed and the opening of a brand new train service, the Elizabeth Line, is a very rare injection of 10 percent extra rail capacity.

But, for London to remain a sustainable and liveable city for hundreds of years into the future, they need to keep public transport options working and attractive to provide affordable and reliable alternatives to car travel. TfL is responsible for London's strategic road network (the boroughs run most roads in London) but they need to be the supporting act to effective public transport and walking and cycling, not the main event.

Serving customers well has been a core area of focus for TfL from the beginning. But given a tough backdrop and this huge human challenge, it has accelerated its customer thinking so that alongside its existing expertise in engineering and safety it has become an organisation that is genuinely customer-led.

## The burning need to do something different

In TfL's remarkable story, we see all three types of burningness play their part – pain, fear and ambition. In part there has been a desire to resolve difficult customer (and staff) pain points to make services better and more accessible to all Londoners.

But there's a bigger picture too – the paramount concern was to continue to deliver significant mode shift away from cars and towards clean, safe and reliable public transport and active travel. A city cannot thrive or be sustainable if it is dominated by vehicles. The need to attract people away from their cars and onto public transport forced TfL to rethink customer experience and how to make it not just good but great.

It had another pressure point to add to the pain, money. There were unavoidably rising costs, increased pressure to secure private investment and decreasing grant support from government including backing for operational elements reducing to zero.

Rather than being overtly fearful, the teams' mood was described more as one of sober realisation at the sheer scale of the task at hand and what was at stake for the capital city, a recognition that gave them focus, motivation and ambition.

This ambition was two-fold. The first was TfL's sense of purpose to keep London moving, working and growing to make life in the city better. Its purpose is in its name – it used to be plain old London Transport, but it was reformed and broadened as Transport for London. A good public transport system, safer roads and better public realm make a huge difference to all aspects of city life.

This intrinsic motivation was hugely strengthened from an external source, the arrival of a democratically elected, publicly accountable London Mayor - in 2000 - with a commitment to keep London moving and to improve the frequency and affordability of public transport. The Mayor of London was the first individual person responsible for all of London's transport modes together, interested in integration and outcomes not just the performance of constituent parts. They also provided the public transport users of London with one obvious person they could complain to and vote out of office. This was a game-changer.

And here in TfL's story there is a coming together of burningness and outside-in thinking. The resolve to prevent the capital city grinding to a halt led directly

to what one leading member of TfL describes to this day as “the most radical intervention in any city in the world in terms of managing traffic” - the Central London Congestion Charge.

The congestion charge was a stick used to address the threat of automotive congestion, and both TfL and Mayor Ken Livingstone knew there had to be a carrot offered up too. If Londoners were to be denied the ability to step out of their home and into a car to drive freely wherever they wanted in the heart of the city, then public transport had to provide a service that felt equivalent. It had to be safe, reliable, frequent, affordable and sustainably supported by more walking and cycling – a service that was no longer faceless, that understood what its customers were thinking and needing, and communicated with them effectively too.

## An outside-in approach

TfL recognised that they weren't an island – it wasn't just their customers' experiences of public transport that they had to understand better, they also had to measure up to the ways customers were starting to enjoy services from other providers. Amazon is now getting established and the way in which they and other organisations interacted was becoming, naturally enough, the expectation of public transport users too.

“We're not a business apart,” says Chris Macleod, TfL's outgoing director of customer and revenue. “We're a business that other people compare with, so our customer experience, our customer service, our customer information, our products, our advertising, has to be as good as everybody else's.”

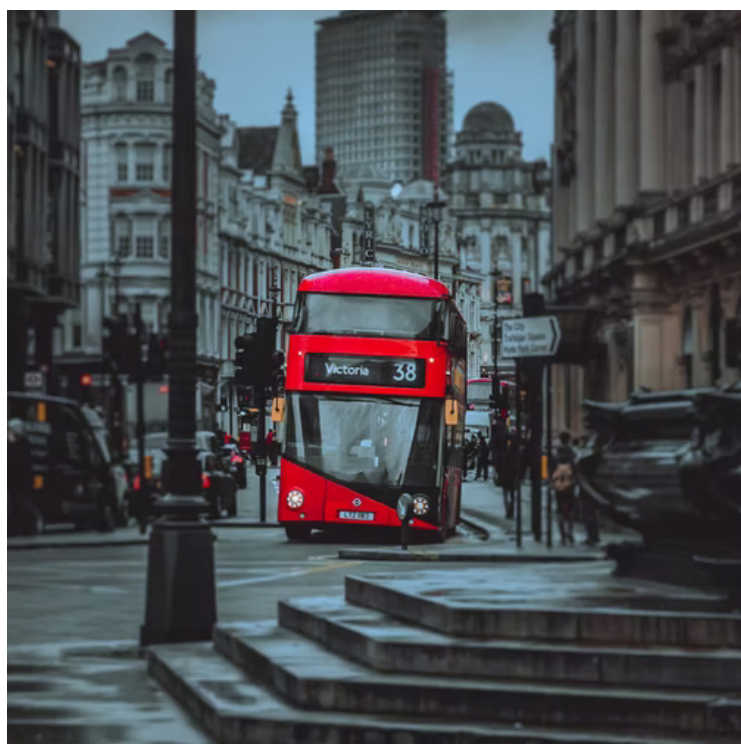
TfL decided to look again at their existing research base to pull together a total picture viewed from the customer perspective. Early insight told TfL that customers cared most about three things: a safe and reliable transport service, value for money and innovation in services so there was leading edge practice and technology in what they experienced. Value for money means not just fares but how TfL treats people and the quality of service they give. And when customers talk about wanting a reliable service, they specifically mean that they want to be confident they can turn up at a bus stop or tube station and be on the move within minutes. If the service did not meet this standard, trust in the option being a truly easy alternative would dissolve and people would get in their cars instead.

The roll out of Oyster across services between 2003 and 2005 was a step in the right direction. It was well received and encouraged TfL leadership to ask what else they could do to be more customer focused. In 2007, when the London Overground circular route around London was created out of a tangle of previously independent train lines, commissioner Sir Peter Hendy and his team saw that corralling the disparate elements of the whole service across London - eleven different Tube lines, eight hundred bus routes and now the Overground - was now both a necessity and an opportunity. Vernon Everitt, who joined TfL that year, as Managing Director for Customers, Communication and Technology, says, "We needed to join it all up for the customer. But, in mass transit, light bulb moments take time to emerge from a constant attritional pursuit of addressing the hard to fix major pain points for customers and staff, like overcrowding, given that there are no innovations or events that suddenly dramatically change capacity or demand, not in a good way, anyway."

In the spring of 2010, as part of the preparation for the unveiling of the latest iteration of the first Mayoral Transport Strategy in May, TfL brought together everyone from the organisation who had something to do with customers. The event took place at Centrepoin in London's West End, and for many people it was the first time they had met each other. The aim of the gathering was to ask a fundamental question about what customer-related issues needed sorting out but, as Vernon Everitt describes, the meeting exploded into life.

"We started to talk about, well, what is our purpose? Why should people choose to use us? Billions of pounds had been put into improving the public transport network to solve the rush hour, but we can't double capacity. What we could do though is provide people with information that enabled them to travel better. How could we spread demand, give people the tools to travel at less busy times? How do we make the bus network more attractive? And what was most obvious that day was that we needed to run a thread through the whole lot, examining it from the perspective of our customers and not the individual modes of transport offered. We needed to integrate it properly."

Everitt had come from overseeing the complaints framework in the financial services industry, but he found TfL's complaints data hidden away. They decided to bring that to the surface so that the organisation could better understand customers' pain points. Now the ambition was there to do things differently, based on two bold assertions; to be joined up about all public transport in London, and to take customer experience as a core starting point alongside excellent operational service delivery.



The story behind every customer-led organisation is unique, dictated by the specifics and vagaries of the business. In the case of TfL, we view the first few years of the millennium as a slow burn steady improvement and we want to focus on the period of 2011 to 2014 as that which saw fundamental outside-in thinking leading to them redefining themselves as an organisation that exists to keep London moving, working, growing and making life in the city better. Becoming a Customer Pioneer in fact.

## The first Moment of Belief

Following the intensive reappraisal of their research base, benchmarking against other industry sectors and deep pain point analysis, in 2011, TfL introduced 'Every Journey Matters' as their single unifying purpose and unambiguous promise to Londoners. It informed Londoners about how TfL was investing their money to improve transport across the city and set out how TfL would now do everything from the planning of the customer's journey, the journey itself, through to resolving complaints and issues. Crucially, it would also seek and gather the customer experience along the way.

### TfL introduced 'Every Journey Matters' as their single unifying purpose and unambiguous

It wasn't simply that customers were being helped to make good, informed decisions to complete journeys efficiently, but that their entire experience was being changed – initially by whiteboards at stations updating service status and maintained by staff now seeing how vitally important up to date information is to a passenger's travel and state of mind. More effective live dot matrix time-boards followed on tube platforms and at bus stops – along with a bus texting service – which, although measuring distance not time, gave customers a better experience because they could 'see' their bus or train's approach and so worried less.

This accompanied existing innovations. Poems on the Tube engaged passengers so that the passing of time was less noticeable and less stressful. Drivers updating passengers also took away stress. Even when a driver came over the speaker to explain that they didn't yet know why the train had stopped, it reassured customers that someone was on it.

The underlying implication of 'Every Journey Matters' was that every passenger matters. "2011 is when we collectively took stock and posed different questions,"

says Everitt. "We asked passengers, 'Do you think we care about you?' That question is on our scorecard to this day: the percentage of Londoners who think TfL cares about them. It's there because that's a massive driver of whether people are prepared to use us or not."

Culturally, TfL has transformed to the point of not merely allowing but encouraging colleagues to interpret 'Every Journey Matters' as they see fit. People working for TfL are encouraged to be themselves with an early manifestation the spread of thoughts-for-the-day on tube station whiteboards (which pre-dates 'Every Journey Matters', having started at Oval station in 2003), piped classical music, pot plants and book-share shelves. Across the organisation, colleagues understand that in their different roles they each need to keep TfL's customers in a position to complete their journeys in a reliable amount of time and to keep them informed when things have gone wrong. Staff have freedom to do it their own way, leading to consistency of action but massive diversity in style and character across individual underground stations, bus drivers and digital service providers.

"To personalise mass transit, that's effectively what we were trying to do," says Everitt.

TfL was moving quickly to build on its engineering and safety remit. The customer-centric thinking became integral. TfL recruited on personality and trained the skill, to remember that people are traveling because they have to, not because they want to, and that they must be treated as individuals not transit statistics. People on the front line with the right personality made a difference to customer experience. The 'Every Journey Matters Academy' was established, based on similar staff training schemes to those used at John Lewis.

## More big Moments of Belief

As big as Every Journey Matters was as a commitment, London 2012 dwarfed it as a practical test. The organisation opted to approach the Olympics as a 'crisis'. The success of it, and the lessons learned, were TfL's next huge Moment of Belief in their customer-led story. The stakes could not have been higher for the organisation or the reputation of the country in the eyes of a global TV audience.

"The London 2012 Games were a massive watershed for us" says Everitt. "Prior to the Games there was huge concern that the transport network would let everyone down. The stadia were built, the athletes were ready but would the trains, tubes and buses cope?" London's Transport Commissioner Sir Peter Hendy and

his team took those questions and forged a coalition of all transport operators to manage the huge risks and tackle the issues head on.

Everitt adds: “We had to re-engineer how people travelled around the city during that period, so that there was a free path into everybody going to Stratford and elsewhere where the events were being held. We knew that we were accountable. The successful delivery of the Games was a turning point. Positive customer sentiment picked up markedly and our customer care score shot up to record levels, where it has remained, and gradually improved, ever since.”

The Olympics saw TfL and its partners convert a potential crisis into a triumph because passengers were given the information they needed to get where they wanted and to avoid hotspots. This created its own momentum, with Londoners and visitors sensing a certain ‘wow’ factor in the efficiency of the Olympics transport delivery and taking pride in the very public, customer-facing presence of TfL throughout.

When the biggest sporting event on the planet finished, the organisation decided that what they had just done had to become their new normal; “this is our new level, we never leave this standard. This is how we do things.”

A special Travel Demand management team had been created for London 2012. They did all of the advertising about when not to travel, where to avoid, how to get to your venues, the re-engineering of the road network, the re-engineering of the Underground and giving customers good information about how they could have more enjoyable journeys. TfL kept and developed the team after 2012 because they wanted passengers to keep feeling the way they had during the Games. Working in collaboration with operational and communications teams across TfL, the Travel Demand Management Team has been at the epicentre of London’s recovery from the pandemic, ensuring that customers return to the network with confidence. “The Travel Demand Management team have been pivotal in bringing Every Journey Matters to life, and it all started during the Games” said Everitt.

“We had a commitment and lots of good ideas for how to be customer-led before 2012,” says Everitt, “but the Olympics gave us an ethos and proof that it worked, all in one go. It all goes back to that mode shift – what do you want for the city? You want to give people reasons to choose you so that you can deliver those wider environmental, social and economic outcomes for London.”





The roll out of contactless payment from 2012 (for buses) to 2014 (for tube and rail) led by its expert Fares and Ticketing team under Shashi Verma, brought a genuine revelation to TfL. Many of the pain points for customers are the same pain points for staff, so fixing one would eradicate both. Contactless was a win-win-win, benefiting customers through ease of use, staff because they are dealing with happier customers, and the organisation by reducing cost. Many customer-led initiatives work like this in the end, but the benefits are hard to see in advance of taking the leap.

TfL's journey to contactless payment, ending a reliance on tickets, was classic outside-in thinking. "The team wanted to put ourselves out of the ticketing business," Everitt says. An inside-out approach would have been doing tickets better – which is what Oyster had been – but TfL was now understanding the underlying problem that tickets solve and finding new and better ways to solve it by having no tickets at all but still getting payment and protecting against fraud.



Contactless payment by debit and credit cards, then smart phones and watches, required innovation from TfL to give each passenger a good deal automatically, so that customers could just tap and go in the knowledge that the best fare would be calculated on a daily or weekly basis. It was what was best for the customer that happened, not what was superficially, financially, best for the organisation. It was automatic and so no effort, and as customers saw that it worked, trust grew – this was an organisation genuinely working on their behalf.

While making life better for passengers, contactless reduced TfL's cost of revenue collection and also had a profound effect on another aspect of customer service because TfL redeployed more colleagues from ticket offices into the public areas of stations.



The commitment to transforming the customer experience of Every Journey Matters, the practical bootcamp of London 2012 and the simple yet transformative impact of contactless, meant that in a half-decade period TfL had built on the innovations of its first decade and transformed the three primary customer experiences of time, ticketing and service.

## Making it systematic

Using data, and specifically open data, has been pivotal in making the outside-in thinking systematic across the huge and diverse portfolio of Underground, Bus, Overground, Tram, River Services, Docklands Light Railway, Dial-a-Ride, Victoria Coach Station, Santander Cycle Hire and the Emirates Air Line.

Data flows in from all these routes in many ways. It comes from trains and buses in terms of where they are, how fast they're moving and how busy they are. And it comes from customers showing how they are moving, with data from payment cards and Oyster cards as they tap into buses and in and out of stations, and also from them moving around the Underground when their wi-fi is logged in. These have told TfL new things like, for example, that their customers found twenty-one different ways to get from Baker Street underground station north of the city centre to Waterloo station in the south, enabling TfL to offer advice on better journeys.

## As long as the data is accurate and helps people make better decisions

Under Everitt's team, the organisation made all its service data openly available to external developers at no cost to them. TfL's belief was that this would be best for their customers. They didn't mind where their customers find out about their journey as long as the data is accurate, helps people make better decisions, reduces crowding and improves the customer experience.

There wasn't a business case for the direction TfL took with this – indeed data is a saleable asset. There was just a hunch that improving the customer experience would benefit TfL in the end, even if money wasn't made directly from the execution.

If justification through cost savings was needed, the TfL team reasoned, then it would only slow things down – it was better to start small and wait for quick wins to prove the concept. When an investment of £200k was needed to get external help with setting up the data portal, Vernon Everitt took on the risk himself by cobbling together the money from different budgets to cover the cost.

"We got into the realms of open data to populate apps that would enable you to navigate the city in a more effective way," Everitt explains. "People still say to me, 'You should have sold the data' but we would have had to create all these products ourselves at a time when we had limited resources and expertise in the area."

"Liberating the data unleashed a small industry in travel information apps. Citymapper and others took our open data and innovated with it, and TfL has benefitted from closer partnerships with companies like Waze, Google, Apple, Bus Checker, Bus Times, Mapway and others, some of whom reciprocally supply TfL with their own data."

"We had to be brave to do all this because there was nothing to prove how it would work, but it said something about the progressive nature of the organisation that everyone pulled together to make it happen."

TfL subsequently introduced its own "TfL Go" app because none of the products on the market were adequately serving disabled Londoners. It provides detailed information, such as the width of gaps between platform and train and the status of lifts, enabling disabled people to make informed decisions about available travel options. TfL is also updating its open data portal so that it is more flexible than ever for developers to use.

## Maintaining Outside-in beliefs

Maintaining outside-in beliefs once they have been established is a big challenge and arguably more difficult to achieve than getting there in the first place.

As Everitt puts it, "It's important for organisations of our size and scale to be relentless in focusing outwards and to break out of silo'd ways of working. We are in competition with many other forms of transport and so it's vital to keep treating people as customers and not just passengers. Everything needs to be joined up and seamless and we need to make it easy for people to choose us."

"At the management level, the best way to keep people coming up with great ideas and sustain customer focused thinking is to enshrine customer care on the corporate-level scorecard, which is approved by our board and reported on publicly. It is the composite measure of how customer-focused we are. On top of that, we publish our customer promises for everyone to see and to hold us accountable for delivering. And Every Journey Matters remains an enduring way of having a common purpose internally which helps everyone see that their work is crucial to its delivery."

In other words, they keep the pressure on. TfL surveys a thousand customers per quarter and does separate bespoke research for people with disabilities of whom there are nearly a million in London today. This, alongside feedback from staff and complaints data, provides regular insight into how well the organisation is delivering for all Londoners.

Open and honest communication is also central to TfL's approach. "We try to tell it how it is," Everitt says. "When we delved into value for money perceptions, we found that people thought that when we raised fares we were increasing profits. They thought we were



a commercial entity. We have hard evidence that our communications campaign about reinvesting profits into customer service has had a major impact on people's perception of our value for money."

None of this is a bonus or a frill. The ability to make changes and talk about them are the tools needed for TfL to deliver on its responsibilities. The latest Mayoral Transport Strategy makes a commitment to reduce Londoners' dependency on cars in favour of "active, efficient and sustainable modes of travel" for 80 per cent of all trips in London by 2041. The next chapter starts here.

## Outcome

Managing London's public transport system is not for the faint hearted. Numbers keep growing yet the infrastructure remains brutally limited. Strong relationships need to be formed with trades unions and myriad other stakeholders. It is a complex environment. Despite this, the TfL team has achieved extraordinary things including steering Londoners through an Olympics, to ticketless travel and the digital revolution, dealing with the threat of terrorism and, sadly, often heroically, with the reality of terrorist attacks too.

The mode shift out of private transport (cars) to public transport and active travel (walking and cycling) was 11% from 2000 to 2019, and within that, a 6% shift from 2007 to 2019. Meanwhile, the extremely high perceptions of 'does TfL care?' are in part a direct result of having more visible staff throughout London's transport system. In March 2013, 43% of customers agreed that TfL cares about them. The latest, July 2021 figure is 58%. Over this eight-year period, the rise in customer care scoring has been consistent and sustained.

The company's innovation embraces both the implementation of cutting-edge tech and the encouragement of individuality with a human touch. Contactless payment has transformed the customer experience and the staff and resources freed up have been redeployed. The company's public face is unrecognisable from just a few years ago.

Thanks to their leap of faith to open up all their data for free there are now 600 apps powered by their data

and unified API, 30 data sets available to over 6,000 developers competing and innovating to provide high quality, real-time information to TfL customers and road users. The customer database stands at 4 million live contacts, whilst 2.3 million people follow TfL on Twitter. A 2017 report by Deloitte estimated that the release of open data by the organisation generated annual economic benefits and savings of up to £130m for travellers, London and TfL itself.

Another measure of what has been achieved - one that would have sounded bizarre a couple of years ago - is the transformation of London's public transport system into a customer-led organisation able to steer one of the most populous cities in the world through a global pandemic.

"The pandemic has thrown a whole range of things at us that we could never have imagined," says Everitt. "We had to flip our customer information on its head because in March 2020 suddenly all that mattered to our customers was whether the train was crowded or not. And everything TfL has done in recent years has come to fruition, knowing when each station is busy and not busy and using our real-time data because we got WiFi onto all of our stations."

The Department for Transport's plans for a state-owned body to replace Network Rail are being modelled on TfL, a clear vindication of its work. But in summing up where TfL has got to, Vernon Everitt displays all the healthy signs of an organisation that is determined to maintain the trajectory and momentum of its customer led transformation.

"Delivering 80% sustainable mode share by 2041 is our North Star. Before the pandemic, we were at 63% and we are looking forward to welcoming more and more people back to public transport, walking and cycling as restrictions are eased. We also look forward to the opening of Crossrail in 2022, the Northern line extension, further progress on electrifying the bus fleet and making the network more accessible. This relies on us having access to the funding necessary to make it all happen and we are working hard on all that too."

This is a journey that, despite its success, has no end in sight.