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Breaking with tradition

It is again time for a UITP World Congress, or as it is now known, the Global Public Transport Summit, the big event in UITP's — and arguably the public transport industry's — calendar. It is always interesting to see what topics the participants are discussing in the run-up to the event and at the event itself — and how these have changed from two years previously.

One trend that stands out this year is a greater focus on non-traditional transport modes. Concepts like smart mobility, mobility-as-a-service, demand-responsive transport and disruptive technology all contrast with the 'traditional' high-capacity, fixed-route modes that have been the mainstay of public transport for many decades.

It is notable that UITP is actively courting providers of such services as potential members. Their growing acceptance by the public transport industry started with authorities acknowledging these services as another option for passengers who might also use trams or buses. This approach is helpful — if public transport organisations are to serve passengers, senior figures in the industry need to consider the door-to-door journey rather than looking at different modes as discrete entities. At the end of the day, the more options a passenger has for reaching his or her destination, the better for the passenger.

Another reason for embracing new technologies is to regulate them better. Regulations and laws usually lag behind the development of technology, so it is essential that public transport authorities and all levels of government work closely with innovators to develop effective regulations quickly.

It is encouraging to see many operators and authorities moving the focus of their thinking away from heavy engineering and towards the passenger. But the pace of technological development means that they will need to run to stand still. And it is also worth remembering that not all heavy engineering challenges have been met.

Growing awareness of air quality has led to a feeling that 'something must be done', with the general idea that vehicle exhaust emissions ought to be reduced as much as possible. The replacement technology will be developed by industry, hopefully with government help. Electric, hybrid or hydrogen-powered vehicles will become a more common sight on city streets as these technologies advance and as more stringent regulations are introduced. Wider environmental impacts, away from the point of use, will be debated.

This still leaves the question of who will pay. Some governments have priorities other than public transport or cleaner air, and in any case it never hurts public transport operators to have alternative revenue streams in place. Technology can help here too. Fares and advertising remain revenue generators, but there are many more. For example, the increasing amount of data generated by passengers passing through a metro network could be interesting to advertisers and others. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that these activities do not start to alienate passengers. ■



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