

Overcrowding at the TRB Annual Meeting (or, Is the Meeting Too Successful?)

Executive Director
Transportation Research Board

Dear Sir:

The last TRB Annual Meeting in January exhibited serious crowding problems. I understand that (total attendance exceeded 6,700). There are those who say that this is a tribute to *you*, your staff, and the development of an exciting program by the TRB committees. But there are those of us who know better and see it all as just another case of induced demand.

I heard many complaints about the crowded sessions, with individuals standing around the sides of rooms and backed out into the halls. Clearly something has to be done! There's the view that we need bigger rooms and the need for a fourth hotel arises. The sense is that a lot more capacity is needed.

In several sessions in which I spoke, I noted throngs pushing to get into the room. I assumed, in all modesty, that I was attracting a vast audience. Then I noted that there were throngs pushing to get into almost every session. It appears that we are talking about indiscriminating throngs, willing to attend almost anything.

In one packed session, while seated high on the dais awaiting my turn to speak, with a lofty view usually reserved for economists, I noticed that in the back of the room a hotel employee was unloading chairs. As fast as they were setup, people sat on them. The faster he put out chairs the faster people sat. Finally, he ran out of chairs, and people stopped sitting. Then, with that keen insight for which I am known, I realized: *Chairs cause sitting!*

This member of the custodial staff who was unloading chairs thought he was doing the right thing, of course. He thought, misguided as he was, that it was his job to provide more capacity for people who wanted to sit. But we must not fall into his trap. We are professionals. We understand these things on a plane to which he cannot hope to aspire. Look at what has happened! Just a few years ago we added the Washington

Hilton Hotel to the historical Omni Shoreham-Sheraton Washington complex. This effectively represented an increase of almost 50 percent in capacity and in a few short years all that additional capacity has been filled up. As fast as we add capacity it fills up. *Obviously, more capacity is not the answer.*

Given the number of policy analysts and planners available to us, and a planning process rich in depth, breadth, height, width, length, density-and viscosity-we can devise a better answer. *This is a clear case for demand management.*

The first rule of demand management is market analysis. *We have to know our customers better; in order to know better how not to serve them.* We have to devise ways to get them to want what we want them to want.

I have carefully reviewed the attendance lists examining the affiliations of those attending, and have devised the following typology of attendance.

- Defense industry types looking for nails that fit their particular hammer (a very expensive hammer) (40 percent);
- Environmental advocates looking for their next project nor to let happen (20 percent);
- Bicycling enthusiasts vying to be the first in America to have a billion-dollar bike path project (the smart money is on Portland) (20 percent);
- Metropolitan Planning Organization directors, who have been told that ISTEA (Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991) puts them in charge, wandering the halls trying to find out: "In charge of what?" (5 percent);
- Lobbyists roaming around trying to find who really is in charge-and of what (10 percent); and
- A few "monomodalists" still practicing their arcane and dying art (5 percent).

Given this distribution of attendees, we can *devise a demand management strategy* - a throng management system, TMS, that will not, of course, solve the problem, but will manage it in perpetuity. We will have to devise a Throng Management Information System, TMIS, to report on progress. After an environmental scan, strategic analysis, and some actual thought, I propose the following.

1. Quality Management. The papers and sessions are too good. To reduce demand, we need either more discerning audiences or lower-quality products. As noted, the throngs we are dealing with are clearly of the indiscriminating type. Education will be too long and costly, therefore, we need to reduce the quality of papers to reduce the attraction. I understand from your staff and several attendees that some real progress is already being made in this area, so perhaps you are ahead of me on this, but this is no time to slack off.

2. Peak Spreading Idea No. 1. Given that the defense industry types will sit through anything with IVHS (now ITS ed.) in the title, I suggest that all sessions mandatorily have IVHS in the title (e.g., "IVHS and the Slump Characteristics of Concretes"). You get the idea.

3. Peak Spreading Idea No.2. TRB sessions only fill up 12 hours of a 24-hour day. This is a waste of capacity. We could have sessions from 6:00-8:00 am for college professors who can't attend the meeting unless they are giving a paper. They could present papers to each other. We could call it Sunrise Semester at TRB.

4. Peak Spreading Idea No.3. What happens after 10:00 p.m. at TRB's Annual Meeting? People either drink Or sleep. We need a late night with TRB series of sessions for the young in-crowd who can network after the older folks have gone to bed.

There's also a chance for an after-midnight rerun of old papers. It is not clear how many TRB papers each year fall into the category of reruns of old papers; certainly not a whole lot more man half.

5. No demand management approach would be complete without a pricing strategy. We clearly have to charge admission to some of the really hot-ticket sessions. This could give rise to ticket scalping, but rigorous policing can keep it under control. There's always the concern over whom we are pricing out of the system: there may be some sessions that only consultants and industry salesman can attend, but, hey, that's what a marketplace is all about.

Finally what price to charge is key. There will be those who favor average cost pricing; then there are short-run marginal cost types; and finally the long-run marginal cost types (I'm a medium-run average guy myself, size 40). Pricing can be tested to establish that exquisite point at which we begin to price people out of the system. In some of the sessions in which I have participated, I reckon that about 25 cents should do it.

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