

Traffic restraint and retail vitality

Over the last fifty years our cities have been remodelled, almost by accident, to make more and more space for the car. Supermarkets and malls, with massive car parks, have overpowered businesses in city locations. At the same time our streets have become noisy, polluted and unpleasant. We need to make streets more attractive for residents and visitors, and improve the environment for businesses.



Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzoe

Streets of the future: Strasbourg, once dominated by traffic, is now vibrant and attractive, with modern trams and busy shops

Know your customer!

"Know your customer" is a key rule of business. Shopkeepers in the Austrian city of Graz were asked how their customers reached the shop. The graphic shows their estimates; do you know how your customers arrive? Turn to page 2 to see how accurate the Austrian shopkeepers were....

John Savage, Chief Executive, Business West (Bristol, Bath and South Gloucestershire chambers of commerce and Business Link service) says that

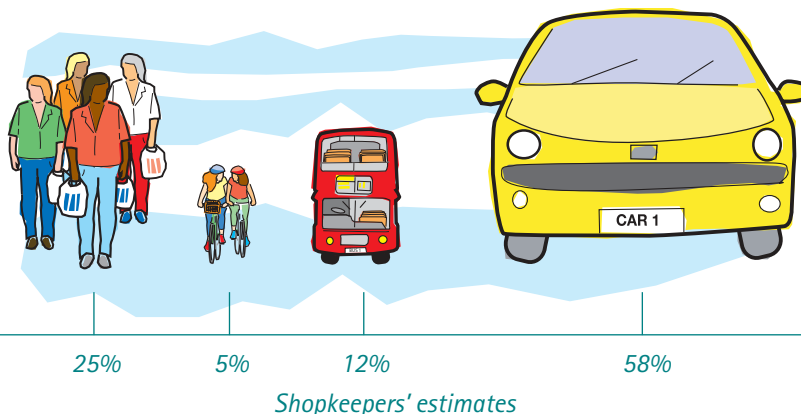
"transport links are crucial to the city's success but the impact of poorly conceived road-building and growing congestion on the urban environment has been severe."

"At the same time," he says, "Bristol faces competition from out-of-town shopping areas with massive car parking and almost complete freedom from restraint on their environmental impact."

"The strategic view of Business West and the Chambers of Commerce in the West of England is that we can compete most effectively by making the most of our beautiful, historic and varied urban environment. This means selective redevelopment, rehabilitation of city centre spaces, improvements to public transport and tackling traffic. Reducing traffic speed and volumes will be good for Bristol's businesses."

Know your customer!

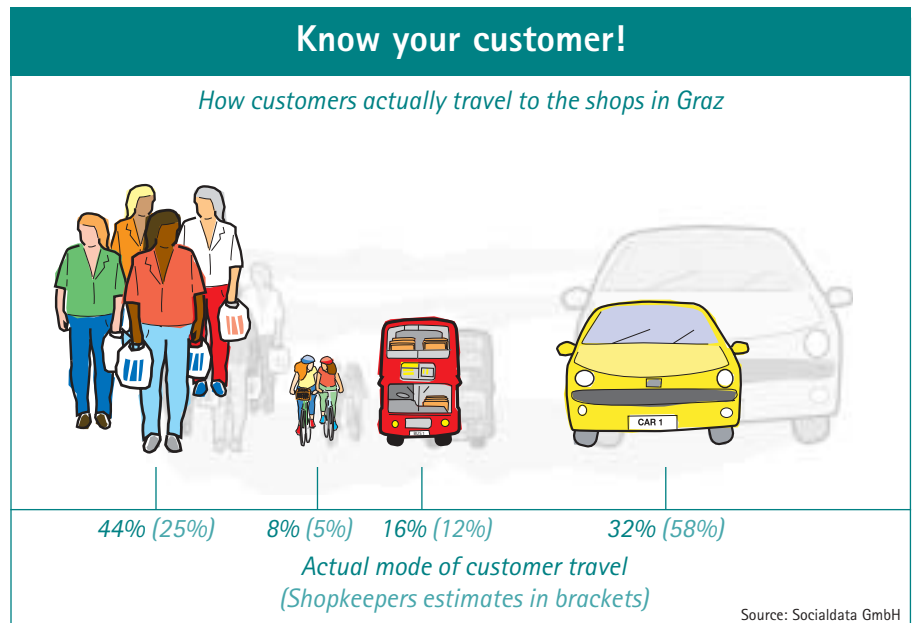
Retailers in the city of Graz were asked "How do your customers travel to your shop?"



Source: Socialdata GmbH

Know your customer!

Graz is a vibrant and commercially successful city... but not necessarily because the traders know their customers. The reality of customers' travel choices (right) is a very long way from the traders' estimates; in particular, the traders overestimated their customers' use of the car by more than 80%. This could have serious consequences in planning transport to benefit local business. Do you know how your customers arrive?

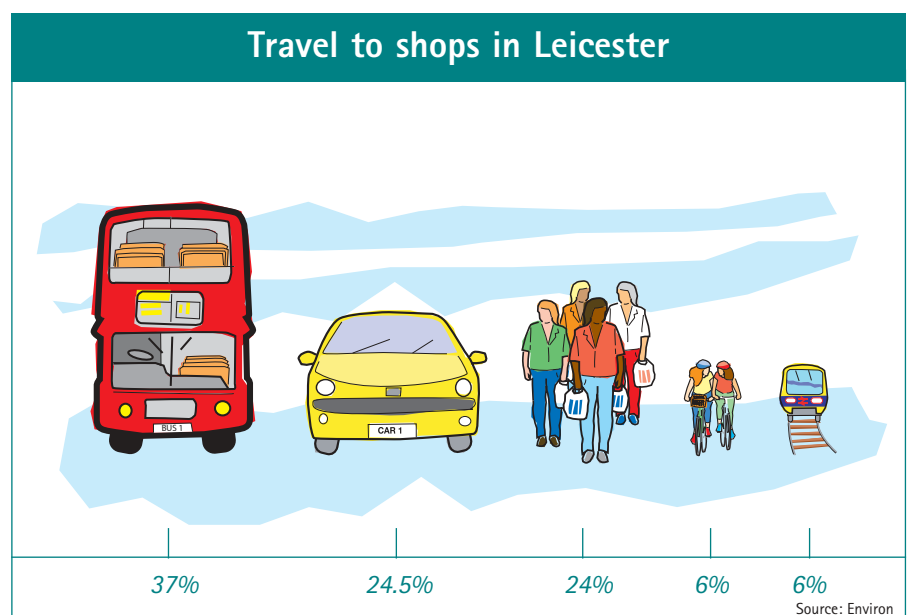
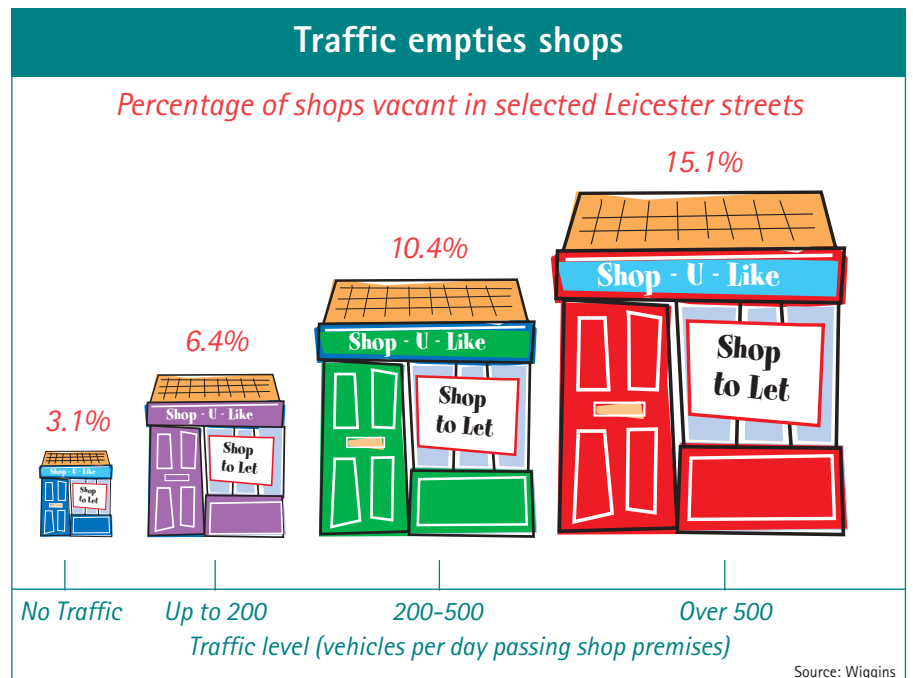


Is traffic a threat to trade?

If reducing traffic volumes and speeds is good for business, is the reverse true, that increased traffic has a negative effect? In 1992, researchers in Leicester looked at traffic volumes in relation to retail property vacancies, and concluded "there is a strong positive relationship between percentage vacancy rates and motorised traffic flow. The results make clear that shop vacancy rates increase as the level of traffic increases"⁽¹⁾

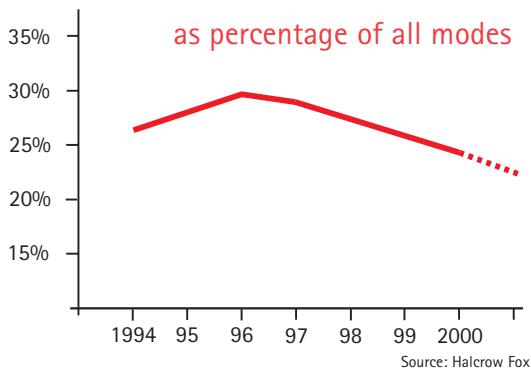
On the other hand, car parking availability and price do not seem to impact on shop vacancy rates, according to a study of six Midlands towns in 1994, which showed that "parking provision does not have an influence on whether shops close or remain trading". The overall quality and attractiveness of the centres had more impact on trade.⁽²⁾

Another retail study found that "car-borne shoppers are not of overriding importance to trade in Leicester city centre. Numerically, bus passengers are far more important. City centre shops gain little, if any, benefit from car parking located close to them. The quality of shopping, and of the shopping environment, is more important in generating trade. Walking past shops is also a strong factor in trade generation"⁽³⁾

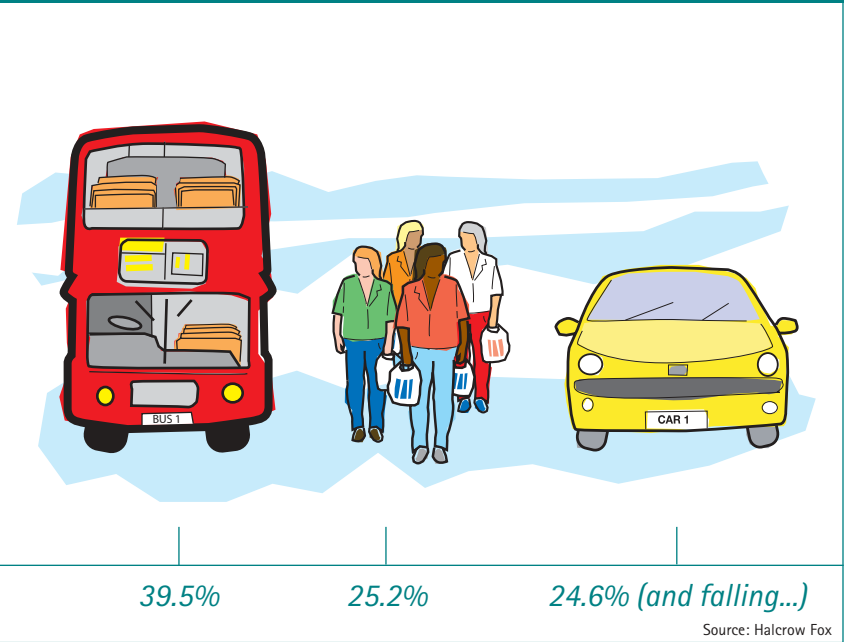


The results of a similar study in Edinburgh are very close to those from Leicester; most people come into the city by bus, and more people walk than drive. The car has less than 25% of the total transport mix, and this is falling.⁽⁴⁾

Car travel to Edinburgh centre



Travel to Edinburgh city centre



What does the customer think?

Why do we pay more to eat at a riverside restaurant, or on the ninth floor with a fantastic city view? The environment is an important factor in valuing a service provider. Studies carried out in Edinburgh reveal a lot about how the customer assesses the environment where they buy, and what they think about transport in the city.

For a study into the impact of out-of-town malls on trade in the city, local shoppers, visitors and retailers in Edinburgh city centre were asked what positive and negative

factors affected them most. Shoppers' main concern was a good range of shops in an attractive, comfortable environment. Parking was not identified as important.⁽⁵⁾

The conclusion is clear; customers valued the diversity and vitality of a traditional shopping street, but it was damaged for them by the impact of traffic.

Residents were asked how they felt about their city: 85% were concerned about air quality. 61% of residents and 62% of visitors wanted

"greater restraints on cars and lorries". While 42% of residents demanded "improvements for pedestrians and cyclists", 57% of visitors supported this - many come from countries with more advanced pedestrian facilities.

The retailers' views were completely out of line with their customers'. Only one issue was mentioned by more than 10% of retailers: parking! As we say, "know your customer⁽⁶⁾....."

Edinburgh shoppers' concerns



43% good selection of shops



33% pavements not wide enough



30% more pedestrian priority



19% traffic congestion



16% pedestrian environment "unsafe"

retailers' concerns



51% wanted more parking

Sources: Roger Tym and Partners, Touche Ross and Co

Recommendations

- 1 Retail vitality depends in large measure on an attractive environment.
 - heavy and/or fast-moving traffic drives people away
 - traffic restraint should always be combined with measures to improve the street environment, such as:
 - pavement widening
 - seats
 - planting
 - decorative surfaces
 - raised pavement crossings
 - improved cleaning and maintenance regime.
- 2 Successful trading streets offer wider choice than a Mall, with a wide mix of retail and other uses, such as cafes.
- 3 Most shoppers come on foot, by bus and by bike. Easy car access is less important than many traders think.
 - bus access is important, and stops may need to be moved to best suit the needs of customers
 - pedestrian routes to shopping streets must be good, with clear signing and priority over motor traffic
 - cycle parking needs to be "little and often" and very close to popular retail destinations
 - it is worth losing some car parking slots to create an attractive streetscape.



Strøget in Copenhagen: high quality details create a national landmark street where once there was only traffic

Hove – traffic restraint in a smaller town

Hove's retail provision is centred around George Street. Car access is restricted between 10 am and 4pm from Monday to Saturday, together with environmental improvements such as repaving, installing benches and planting trees, while parking zones were introduced in the surrounding area. These improvements have appealed to shoppers, as shown by the quotes below, and so benefit local businesses.⁽⁷⁾



Liz Beth

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References

- 1 Wiggins, 1993, *Streets, Traffic and Trade, A Survey of Vacant Shop Sites in Leicester City Centre*
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- 7 Transport and Travel Research, 2002, *New Horizons: The Impact of Sustainable Transport Policies on the Travel Behaviour of Shoppers (DfT)*

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"We welcome any research which demonstrates and encourages an integrated approach to transport in cities. Clearly some European cities are already reaping the benefits from schemes which improve the environment for shoppers and prosperity for local businesses.

Bristol City Council is also employing similar good practice here, such as introducing showcase bus routes in Bristol, which is part of our five-year local transport plan, and is good news for shoppers and local businesses."

Richard Rawlinson
Head of Transport
and Traffic
Bristol City Council

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