TravelSmart: An Obituary and Epitaph

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Abstract

Travel demand management is a means of reducing traffic congestion and achieving more sustainable transport outcomes. Application of several voluntary travel behaviour change projects under the TravelSmart brand name formed the basis of travel demand management approach used in Western Australia between 1997 and 2017. Enthusiasm for the TravelSmart brand saw it applied to numerous programs and projects in South Australia, Victoria and Queensland. The expenditure of several million dollars by the Commonwealth, Western Australian and Queensland Governments reaching a target audience of 900,000 people represents the high point for TravelSmart. The TravelSmart brand declined dramatically following failure in Victoria and Queensland and Western Australia is no longer using TravelSmart despite ongoing success of numerous programs.

1. Introduction

TravelSmart® is the brand name for is a large-scale voluntary travel behaviour change (VTBC) program developed in Western Australia in 1995. The brand name and program, different projects in some cases, was adopted across Australia with enthusiasm but by 2016 has quietly died as a brand and major program. This paper is an obituary of the journey TravelSmart over the twenty years from 1996 and reflects on the reasons for its demise. The papers presented at ATRF post 1997 provides a useful forum for tracking the TravelSmart journey.

The author of this paper led the creation of the team in the Western Australian Department of Transport, which established the TravelSmart® brand for a range of trip origin (i.e. residential) and trip destination (i.e. schools, workplaces, etc) projects. The author therefore feels best placed to write the obituary. The paper has a stronger focus on the large-scale trip origin component of the program, often referred to as TravelSmart® neighbourhoods or communities.

2. The Birth of TravelSmart

A small work unit within the Western Australian Department of Transport in 1996 was given the task of developing travel demand management strategy and program. The conceptual foundations, rationale, approach and the TravelSmart brand were presented for the first time in 1997 at the 21st ATRF conference at Adelaide (James and John, 1997). This work underpinned the TravelSmart program that was delivered in Western Australia (WA) for the next twenty years. The TravelSmart brand then appeared in papers presented at ATRF conferences post 1997.

A key approach in (WA) was developing interventions based on empirical evidence as opposed to value laden arguments. This was critical to counter criticisms of ‘social engineering’ and views that people ‘would not get out of their cars’. The use of pilot projects provided learnings through action and evidence counter to these criticisms.
Two pilot projects were presented by intervention practitioners at the 22nd ATRF conference in 1998. These were the “IndiMark®” (James, 1998) and “TravelBlending®” in South Australia\(^1\) (Ampt and Rooney, 1998). These two papers preceded papers in two key directions; the debate by travel survey practitioners and academics on the use of travel surveys to measure behaviour change and the learnings by practitioners from implementing different VTBC interventions. Supportive VTBC research (Curtis and James 1998) and the potential for behaviour change (James and Brög, 1999) was also presented.

3. Practitioners

ATRF papers on interventions have been grouped into categories as shown in Table 1. As previously mentioned, the emphasis of this paper is on trip origin projects.

Table 1: Categorisation of ATRF practitioner conference papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Intervention</th>
<th>Number of papers</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trip origins(^1)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trip destinations(^2)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour change theory(^2)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program(^3)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local government/land use(^1)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car pooling(^1)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Trip destinations are schools, universities, shopping centres and hospitals.

\(^2\) These papers present different VTBC theories and approaches\(^i\).

\(^3\) Papers covering broad state government TravelSmart programs\(^i\).

\(^4\) Papers on local government programs and land use interventions\(^i\).

3.1. Trip origin projects

The “IndiMark®” technique was developed by Socialdata on a large scale in Europe (Brög and Schadler 1998) and employed in WA, Queensland (Qld) and Victoria (Vic) under the TravelSmart® brand (James, et al, 2017, Richardson et al 2005). WA applied the intervention through twenty projects reaching nearly 400,000 people between 1997 and 2008. Papers were presented on pilot projects in WA and Qld (James 1998, Marinelli and Roth 2002) and one large-scale project in WA (James and Brög, 1999). Further papers on large-scale projects were not presented at ATRF, even though most were successful (James, et al 2017). The author is aware of a failure to deliver robust evaluation for the Belmont project in WA.

Two pilot projects using the “TravelBlending®” technique was applied in South Australia (SA) and Qld. This technique was modified into “Living Neighbourhoods®” and advocated as a ‘bottom up approach’ (Ampt 1999, Kent and Ampt 2012). These techniques were applied on a large-scale on the Gold Coast, Qld in 2008 and projects in Adelaide, SA (Ampt and Rooney 1998, Tideman, et al 2006). There was debate on applying the actual extent of behaviour change achieved by “TravelBlending®” across the whole community (Cairns et al 2004, Ker 2004) for three projects in SA and one in Qld.

\(^1\) South Australia at the time adopted TravelSmart® as a brand without the approval of WA, which was given later within a national framework.
3.2 Trip destinations

Table 1 shows most papers by practitioners were on trip destinations. Within this category workplace interventions comprised just under 50% of the papers, followed by schools. A quick review of the papers reveals an ongoing sharing of experiences, mainly of specific projects. Workplace interventions did expand into a program involving 50 employers in WA between 2012 and 2016 (Wake 2016).

4. Travel Survey Practitioners and Academics

The travel survey practitioners and academics were the most prolific of authors, no doubt due to their desire to improve travel survey knowledge and skills plus success metrics encouraging academics to publish. Table 2 shows key themes of their papers. There was a great deal of debate over the rigour of travel survey evaluations and challenges were particularly directed towards individualised marketing projects (Ker et al 2003, Morton and Mees 2005, Stopher and Bullock 2003).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of issue</th>
<th>Number of papers</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey method issues</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey method improvements</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour change measurement</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations challenged</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Categorisation of ATRF travel survey practitioner and academic conference papers

Peter Stopher with students from the University of Sydney were the most prolific in challenging travel survey evaluations and striving to achieve travel survey improvements. Delivery effective evaluation surveys of actual projects by Stopher and Richardson, assuming the VTBC’s are effective, was not evident in many of their ATRF papers (Bertoia et al 2005, Richardson et al 2005, Stopher et al 2006). One of Stopher’s papers using geographic positioning system devices does indicate a reduction in vehicle kilometres travelled in a project in SA (Stopher et al 2009).

5. Discussion

A Strategic Triangle model developed in the public health arena for policy innovations provides a useful framework for presenting the author’s reflections (Leonard 2002). The model comprises three components that policy innovations ideally need to achieve for ongoing success. They are:

1. Capacity – ability of individuals and organisations to effectively deliver and evaluate the policy innovation.
2. Public value – the espoused benefits to the public, both individual and the broader community, are being achieved.
3. Community support – stakeholders and participants support the innovation.

5.1. Capacity

The capacity issue resides in two areas; first the ability by providers to deliver effective interventions and; second the technical ability within procuring agencies to understand what is required to achieve the desired outcomes.
5.1.1 Providers

Socialdata had spent many years developing an approach for cycling and public transport (i.e. "IndiMark®") and large-scale travel surveys (i.e. 'Contiv') in Europe and WA. The home-grown intervention of "TravelBlending®" was in its infancy in 1997 and the travel survey for evaluation purposes was embedded within the intervention. From a procurement perspective, the contestable market was a weak with one provider having a much stronger track record. On this basis WA and Qld went down the IndiMark® path. SA progressed forward with TravelBlending®, which evolved into Living Neighbourhoods (Ampt 1999), but the number and size of SA projects relative to WA and Qld were less and smaller. Vic undertook a large-scale project in Darebin using IndiMark®. In recent years WA has evolved their neighbourhood program into an approach similar to Living Neighbourhoods, with this program moving from the Department of Transport to agencies such as Department of Sport and Recreation.

Use of external travel survey companies for IndiMark® and TravelBlending® has been problematic evidenced by papers presented and the lack of post intervention papers (e.g. Qld world's largest project). The issue of 'conflict of interest' with the company delivering both the IndiMark® intervention and the intervention evaluation was overcome through the use of independent audits undertaken (James et al 2017).

Reflecting on the papers submitted between 2004 and 2013 shows that the ability of Australian travel survey providers to prove public value from VTBC techniques is problematic. Efforts were made in WA to grow travel survey expertise through a several projects however this wasn’t successful. The use of pilots and a delivering many projects over eleven years in WA (1997 to 2008) was in part a risk management approach to dealing with any survey failure. The author is aware of failure occurring in four projects, which were retrieved in the case of two projects with the use of Socialdata’s ‘Contiv’ survey. The Darebin project Vic, which used an external travel survey provider, proved fatal for TravelSmart in Vic in that they weren’t able to prove behaviour change. An external travel survey provider with very limited experience undertook VTBC travel surveys for the world’s largest project in Qld which contributed to the demise of TravelSmart in that state2 (James et al 2017).

The travel survey fraternity in Australia aligned themselves into two camps. The WA and Qld camp were advocates of "IndiMark®" and their defence is evident in 2003 (Ker et al 2003, Ker 2011, Stopher and Bullock 2003). The travel survey fraternity in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide were more conducive to "TravelBlending®" evident by their lack of critical review of this technique and joint authoring of ATRF papers. The genesis of this behaviour could be due to competition for limited funds provided for state governments for VTBC programs.

5.1.2 Procuring agencies

The capacity within the procuring agencies was also a crucial issue. Poor risk management, such as breaking large projects into smaller components, and understanding of the intricacies of achieving high travel survey response rates for example led to disastrous outcomes, such as in Qld.

5.2 Public Value

Proving the public value of TravelSmart requires the difficult task of measuring travel behaviour change. Measuring changes in people’s perceptions or brand recognition often used for marketing is insufficient. This was extremely evident in the early days to counter widely held views as previously mention.

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2 Election of Campbell Newman’s LNP government and flooding in Brisbane in 2010-11 were also external factors. Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast were less impacted by flooding.
The primary tool used is before and after travel surveys. The “IndiMark®” technique provided evaluations that could be applied across whole communities and allowed use of travel surveys with control groups and undertaken over several years to ascertain sustainability of travel behaviour change. Public transport boardings were also collected in WA within the intervention areas. Having the travel survey embedded within “TravelBlending™” proved problematic in ascertaining whole of community travel behaviour change.

A key learning in WA for the neighbourhood projects was the need to achieve high response rates to be able to measure small changes in travel behaviour. Pre and post surveys were undertaken twelve months apart to measure change that were less impacted by school holidays, different weather (seasons) and minimise ‘Hawthorn effects’ (James et al 2017).

A lack of measured behaviour change proved fatal for TravelSmart in Vic and Qld. The travel survey evaluation for the large-scale project Darebin in Vic, which included efforts to measure changes in vehicle traffic counts, was unable identify changes in travel behaviour (Richardson et al 2005). This situation was also terminal for the “world’s largest travel behaviour change project” in Qld despite earlier success with IndiMark® in Qld (Freer et al 2010, p1).

Six papers presented at ATRF on the costs and benefits of both techniques quantified the public value of VTBC programs (Ker and James 1999, Ker 2002, Ker 2003, Ker 2011, Tisato and Robinson 1998, Winn 2004). The value of this is predicated on policy decision makers trusting the validity of the travel behaviour change numbers.

5.2. Community Support

Building stakeholder support is critical for continuation of policy innovation. Great effort was undertaken in WA to build the support of local government, public health advocates (i.e. health promotion), bi-partisan support in parliament, related government agencies (e.g Main Road authorities) and public transport providers. The informal support these stakeholders provided to key policy decision makers can’t be under estimated.

This is evident in the participants in projects undertaken in WA, SA, Vic and Qld pre-2008. The lack of stakeholder support in the world’s largest project in Qld proved critical when the program came under threat by an incoming state government (James et al 2017).

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

TravelSmart as a VTBC brand and approach had an exciting period in travel demand management in Australia between 1997 and 2012. Ultimately the demise of the large-scale TravelSmart program is due to an overall lack of faith by policy decision makers due difficulties in implementing effective evaluation tools, building a strong supportive constituency, and shifting entrenched political ideology. Most of the key players during this period have now left the stage. Project specific trip destination techniques will no doubt continue to develop as they are more discrete projects, focus on trips to specific destinations which are easier to survey and employers/event managers can offer incentives for behaviour change. There are green shoots with new actors will enter the stage when the conditions are conducive to achieving more sustainable travel outcomes albeit with different brand names, techniques (e.g. gamification) and mobile phone technology to improve evaluation of voluntary travel behaviour change programs (Yen et al 2016). Renewed focus on people who have moved to new residences is worth further exploration.

An optimistic epitaph for TravelSmart could read:

Even as the sun goes down,
To end the light of day,
It's rising on a new horizon,
Somewhere far away.
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