

Connecting Wellington to Wairarapa: A Future Vision

Author and Presenter:

Caron Greenough, Bachelor (Hons) of Civil and Environmental Engineer, Master of Science
Transport Planning and Engineering, Principal Safety Engineer, NZ Transport Agency
PSIS House, 20 Balance Street, Wellington
04 9318928

Caron.greenough@nzta.govt.nz

Contributors:

Mark McCann, Customer Development Manager, NZ Transport Agency
Chews Lane, Wellington

Mark.mccann@nzta.govt.nz

Leslie Tregas, Think Place

Leslie.Tergas@thinkplace.co.nz

Abstract

We are challenging the norm! Rather than taking the traditional, expertise led approach to delivering a transport project, the NZTA has decided to trial a customer-focused approach to developing a future vision for the Rimutaka Hill Road.

We want to move beyond simple views about the Hill itself and hear from the people about their entire journey of connection between the Wairarapa and Wellington. We are interested in the road as an enabler of connection between these regions, and how the road impacts on the people that use it.

To do this we got out of the office, talked with people in their businesses/homes, as well as intercepting people in the streets.

We weren't looking for a wishlist of solutions. We were looking to deeply understand their experiences as customers.

This user-centred research will contribute towards a Strategic Business Case for change to the Rimutaka Hill Corridor. This will ensure we are front-loading the customer's voice at the beginning of the process in order to include the voices of those that the future changes may impact the most. Let us tell you how we did it, what the challenges were and why we are changing how we do things!

1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to inform the industry about a recent project that the Agency undertook, as a trial, to show the integration of the “customer” into a traditional transportation project.

The original premise for doing so began with the context that the corridor in question, the Rimutaka Hill Road, connecting Wellington and the Wairarapa, was a high risk corridor but due to low volumes of traffic and high cost of infrastructure, any potential projects within the corridor did not achieve a high enough benefit cost ratio to achieve any Agency outcomes. Neither did the Agency have a comprehensive plan for the route nor a strong relationship with the local authorities or communities. The last strategic corridor plan was developed nearly 8 years ago.

At the same time the Agency had been working on upskilling its staff in understanding our customers and their needs and providing tools to do this. The culmination of the two projects has provided an opportunity to utilise those tools to find out what customers really thought about the Rimutaka Hill Road, to develop a plan and by doing so improving the relationship with the local authorities and communities.

The key mindset to change was that the vision would have a strong empathy for the world of the customer and the reasons why they travel between Wellington and the Wairarapa. When the road and other transport infrastructure is viewed through the lens of the customer what emerges is a deep understanding of the role that the Rimutaka Hill plays in enabling, as well as constraining, peoples lives and livelihood. This then provides juxtaposition to the usual metrics of 6000 vehicles a day, 4 serious/fatal crashes per year, 5.4% freight, 15 minutes travel time bridge to bridge.

The customer-focused future vision will be an input into the Rimutaka Hill Road Business Case process, as well as a case study of what kind of insight and innovation opportunity will emerge from an empathic approach to understanding customers.

To take this forward the Agency engaged Think Place, a Wellington based company that had recently developed our customer foundation workshops.

In consultation and collaboration with Think Place this project was to follow five phases:

1. Framing the Intent
2. Talking to the customers about the Wellington to Wairarapa connection
3. Making sense of what we heard
4. Creating an integrated picture of the experience of our customer
5. Envisioning the future

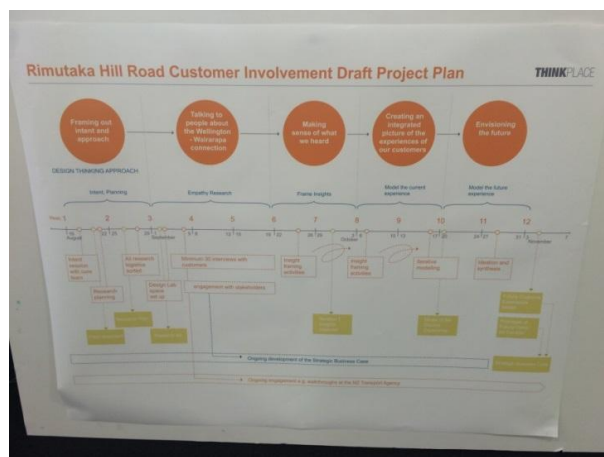


Figure 1 - User Centred Design Thinking

2. Framing the Intent

The first phase of this project was framing our intentions for doing what we were seeking to achieve. What was our current understanding of our own processes as well as our understanding of the problem? What would make this project successful and what questions still needed to be answered?

We didn't just want to solve the problem of improving safety along this route. We wanted to understand the value of truly understanding customer needs, have a process that was repeatable for other projects – assuming we had answered the value question – and upskill our staff so they could follow this process again.

From a traditional view point one of the interesting outcomes of this phase was actually defining who customer was. Typically this was a commuter and they were divided into car drivers, truck drivers, motorcyclists etc and they drove on the road. From this phase we discovered that the customer wasn't defined by the mode of transport but by the reasons they needed to make the journey and for why they connected between the Wellington region and the Wairarapa.

Our intent statement therefore became:

Develop a vision for connecting Wellington and the Wairarapa which is based on customer insights. By not constraining ourselves to existing infrastructure, we can develop a cohesive and integrated vision that can be shared, internally, with external partners and with the public.

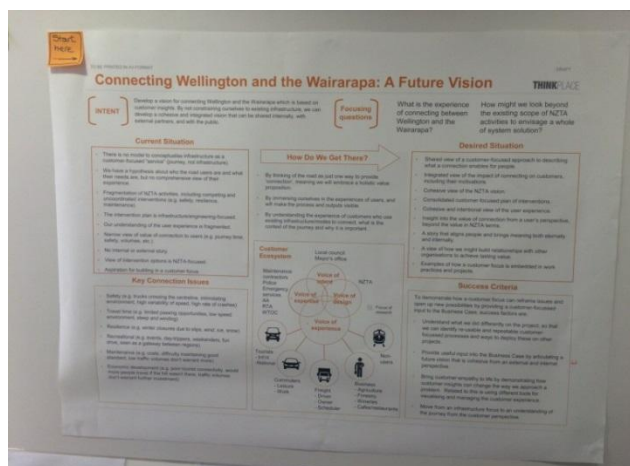


Figure 2 - Framing the Intent

3. Talking to people about the Wellington and Wairarapa Connection

The second phase to this project was the actual listening - going out and talking to our customers face-to-face. We chose this approach rather than using an electronic survey so we could really immerse ourselves in the experience and get a real sense of what they thought and felt about the connection. Think Place advised us that in their experience, that while not statistically significant, we may only need to interview 10 or 15 people before we started to hear the same things and not get any more value from the process.

In the end we talked to 54 people as we felt on reflection that the customer was quite diverse and there were some areas that needed to be explored further, for example, the tourist or the cultural connection that emerged during discussions.

We also didn't use a structured questionnaire, though we had a framework, as this allowed more flow to the conversation. We also included other techniques such as word cards and drawing pictures to draw out as much information as possible. The slight drawback, which will be explained in the next phase, was that we had a lot of qualitative data to go through. For me personally as an engineer and more analytical this was a challenge! The important thing to note was that we didn't directly ask the customer what they wanted to change about the road. We wanted to understand the purpose of the journey and the experience of travelling between the two regions. This then didn't constrain the insights to just what the Agency should do but what other partners were involved and what ideas were out there that were broader than just the road.

The value though of being immersed in this experience, really listening to how these people lived their lives and what they truly experience on this journey, was precious. As a transport agency we could be accused of being faceless and uncaring as we deal with facts and figures. This felt like we were not only listening to what the customer was saying but giving the Agency a human side. Ultimately this may give us challenges of how it will translate back into our traditional system but it felt right and worthy.

4. Making sense of what we heard

This phase took the longest and challenged those of us that like numbers and statistics. As the interviews had been shared around the project team, it was important to hear what others had said, so we were tasked firstly with reading the transcripts of other interviews to get that broader view. We also had to interpret meaning at times as the customer may not have said something explicitly or how we might have phrased something. Then we needed to put what we had heard into a framework when one didn't exist at first.

So we drew insights on such things as:

- What did we learn?
- What surprised us?
- Important ideas
- How might we ...

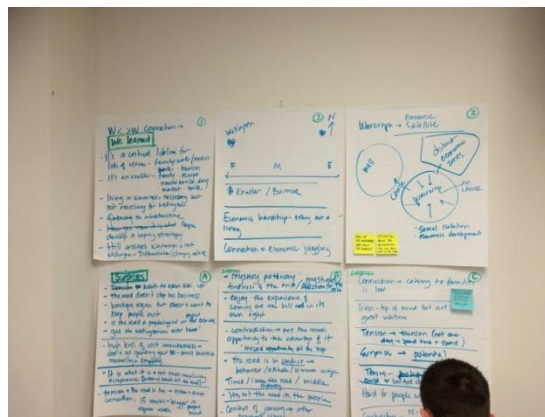


Figure 3 - Drawing out the insights

We were surprised by how cost conscious our customers were – they understood the trade-off of living in a rural area and having to travel for work or their business but also on such matters as how the tourist industry worked and why a tunnel to connect the two regions was not viable. We learnt that our customers contradicted themselves often – they wanted the economic benefits offered by Wellington but didn't want the uniqueness and special feel of the Wairarapa changed – but it wasn't their job to resolve this conflict

We learnt that safety – while being the key metric for the Agency – was not at the forefront of their minds although we do know from experience that road users are not that good at assessing risk. But our biggest moment was when we realised that part of the reason was that each customer had developed certain rituals which allowed them to cope with the journey.

Coping strategies included travel and non-travel solutions - from not travelling by car at all i.e. by not travelling at all or using the train as an alternative through to picking up a carpooling buddy, grabbing a coffee from the shop that opens at 5am, tuning into the radio and just chilling out – “it is what it is”!! The coping was linear from hating the trip through to loving the trip – but the rituals moved each person from one stage of coping to the next or by interfering with a ritual even back again – take road works for example that mean the journey now takes an extra 10 minutes. Taking this a step further into solutions this allowed us to see the potential for far more solutions. If the Agency could provide opportunities to enhance that coping mechanism then in theory we wouldn't need to make any major infrastructure investment – what if we provided more coffee shops that opened early, made wifi or even just good radio transmissions right the way over the Hill, would those alone make the road safer as drivers would be calmer and less stressed about the journey??

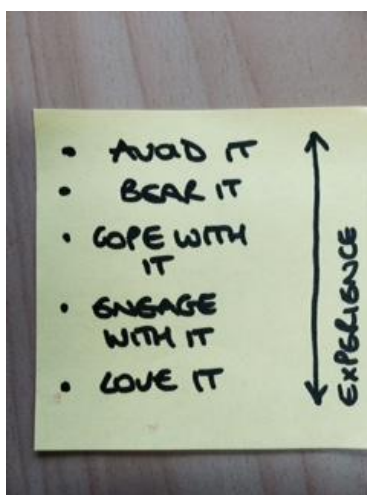


Figure 4 - Making Sense of What we Heard

Overall this phase allowed us to draw meaning from what we heard and keep testing and retesting different scenarios – something that we don't normally do in quite the same way. Think Place also kept challenging our perspective to ensure we were looking at the insights from all angles and didn't settle on a solution too quickly.

5. Creating an integrated picture of the experience of our customer

One of the outcomes of this process was to provide a picture of what we learnt so that we could use it to develop our future vision and communicate the story to everyone about what we discovered in a more comprehensive way.

Again we tested various models and scenarios and the one we developed was based on personas. What did our customers look like, what delighted them, what ideas would help them? Their stories helped introduce these personas to a wider audience and to test solutions against their needs later on.



Figure 5 - Developing Personas

6. Envisioning the future

The final part of this project was to envision the future. By using the personas and all the insights from all the various angles we were able to develop this future vision. We also needed to validate what we had heard and ensure we were all on the same page going forwards. This will then allow everyone involved to test their own projects against what the customer needs and have a story to tell our partners and the other users of this connection.

7. Key learnings

The key learnings have been that taking the time to listen, as a project team member, to the customer directly is invaluable and while going directly to a stakeholder group is important and could be perceived as quicker, the insights are often diluted by what comes up regularly as issues and there is little depth. This is also an opportunity to others that wouldn't normally voice their opinions.

We didn't go to the customer for answers but for an empathetic understanding of their experiences of connecting. The research was not about quantitative measurements of customer wants but about qualitative and deep understanding of the customer experience from an outside-in perspective.

This also provided a challenge for those in the traditional engineering fields as we are used to quantitative measurements and to a very linear process. Design thinking provided a much deeper insight and those insights could and should be tested and retested until the whole team was happy.

The personas that we developed can be used to explore what the desired state will look like from a customer perspective but they are very personal to this project.

This is only the start of a longer process of developing the business case and how enduring this will be, up against our more traditional processes, is yet to be discovered.