

Design Effectiveness Awards

NET Freshers' campaign 2022

Client – Nottingham Express Transit (NET)

Dates – Project commenced May 2022 – completed October 2022
with a repeat of campaign for 2023 Freshers' period of
August to October 2023

Executive Summary

NET (Nottingham Express Transit) is our client. Each year, they invest in a marketing and communications campaign aimed at new college and university students during the Freshers' period - when students first arrive in September-October. Students are a significant part of NET's target market, with an influx of approximately 70,000 students a year to Nottingham.

The campaign includes having a presence at the Freshers' events held by Nottingham's universities and colleges, as well as wider campaign activities across the whole Freshers' period.

A lot of students are new to the city, or at least new to using the tram to get around for their studies. So the campaign is an opportunity to make students aware of the tram network, routes and destinations, discounted travel with NET's student pass Freshers' deal, and how to use the tram and tram safety. For example, tram passengers must purchase a ticket to travel before they board or risk a significant fine.

We designed NET's Freshers' campaign for the first time in 2022, with previous campaigns done by other agencies. Campaign activity is measured using clear metrics, focused on the campaign's key objectives:

- Sales of the Academic Year Student Pass (which is discounted during the Freshers' period).
- To generate awareness and educate new students on the tram network and the ticket buying process.

- To increase NETGO! app downloads (this is NET's app used for buying tickets, planning routes and for live updates on the network), social media followers and email addresses collected.

The results of our design for NET's 2022 campaign show:

- Revenue from Academic Year Student Pass sales increased by 95% compared to 2021.
- Tram travel by the student market increased beyond the Academic Year Student Pass with a 30% increase in discretionary travel following the Freshers' campaign period, indicating greater overall awareness of the tram and the need to buy a ticket.
- An increase in NETGO! app downloads from a daily average of 276 downloads to a daily average of 664 for the campaign period.



Context and overview

What's the business context?

NET runs the 32km-long tram network in Nottingham City and surrounding areas. NET manages everything from maintaining the trams and network, to sales of tickets and passenger safety. NET's concessionaire is Tramlink, who's parent company Meridiam build and run tram systems around the world.

NET approached us in 2022 as they wanted a more cohesive Freshers' campaign with a stronger theme running throughout. In previous years, other agencies had designed different campaign elements alongside an event that didn't work cohesively as a unified campaign or have any obvious links to NET or Nottingham. For example, the 2021 campaign involved giving away seeds to students, alongside a fairground activation. NET felt seeds were the wrong giveaway for students, as many students don't have the growing space to plant them in student accommodation, and no link was made to tie these different elements together or back to NET trams.

The previous year's Freshers' event for NET.



Overview of market

At the time of this project, there was extreme pressure on NET, and travel companies in general, to encourage people back on to public transport, after Covid-19 had significantly impacted travel and in turn, revenue.

NET's main competitors are cars and buses, but for the student market, Nottingham City Transport (NCT) - the city of Nottingham's lead bus operator - is the main competitor, with the two companies often competing with counter promotions. NET is restricted by the tram network, which means NCT can offer a journey to more places for a larger market in and around Nottingham City. However, the tram network services key locations around the city and beyond and is low carbon and significantly cheaper, particularly when it comes to student passes.

Business challenges to be solved by the campaign:

- Students were coming out of the Covid-19 years, tram travel had been impacted, and profits were down, so NET needed to get tram use increasing.
- New students to Nottingham, particularly international students, don't know the tram network or how the process of buying a tram ticket works. For instance, there are some countries where you buy your ticket onboard the tram, whereas with NET, you need to buy your ticket via ticket machines on tram platforms or via the NETGO! App before you travel, so these differences can cause confusion and/or inadvertent fare evasion.
- Fare evasion costs NET approximately [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA] in lost revenue each year. From their research, NET know that some people, particularly in the young adult market, mistakenly and anecdotally believed there is no real need to buy a ticket - because 'no one checks' and 'nothing happens if they do'. In reality, tickets are routinely checked and with NET's zero tolerance policy on ticket evasion, passengers risk a fine for not buying a ticket before they board.

Key business objectives to be achieved by the campaign:

- Generate revenue by driving sales of NET's Academic Year Student Pass.
- Increase the number of NETGO! app downloads to drive discretionary ticket sales aside from the Academic Year Student Pass and raise awareness of the tram service. Secondary to this, also increase social media followings to raise awareness of the tram service.
- Create awareness of the tram and the benefits of using the tram over other transport options in the city, specifically buses. Educate students more broadly on the tram network, the app, the journey planner, and the destinations.
- Reduce fare evasion and increase revenue by promoting the correct ticket buying process and by making students aware of fare evasion penalties. For example, NET ticket officers, including plain-clothes inspectors, regularly check tickets along the tram network and passengers caught travelling without a ticket are automatically fined in the vast majority of circumstances.
- Collect student email addresses with marketing consent for marketing and communications activities.

Our research

We started the project by conducting desk-based research into the audience including student activity, behaviour and perceptions at the time (2022), to understand young people's experience in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and whether they're ready to get out about again, and to understand their perceptions of the trams, in order to shape our strategy.

Our research showed:

- In the main, students did want to go out, but to visit campus and to socialise. Some still felt like limiting socialising, but the majority felt they had already missed a lot and didn't want their university experience to be impacted (source: The Uni Guide). There was a drive amongst

young adults to get back out and about again for their mental health and for the importance of connection (source: BMJ Journals).

- Most universities and courses were back on campus, but students were offered podcast versions of seminars they could do remotely if preferred. Unless a student is on a specific remote learning course, students have a minimum requirement to be on campus (source: The Uni Guide).
- Reddit conversations between Nottingham students showed that the bus is more prevalently discussed as the main mode of transport, but that Nottingham's transport links in general, including the tram, are very good. There were threads discussing having been fined for not buying a tram ticket before boarding but also opinions there of 'you don't really need to buy a ticket' (source: Reddit).

Insight provided by NET

- Insight provided by NET on 6 July 2022, from research they commissioned to understand perceptions of the trams by Nottingham consumers.
- Only half of respondents felt tram tickets offer good value for money and just 2 in 5 felt the tram is better value than the bus. 47% of respondents felt the bus was good value, and 36% felt the tram was. This felt surprising to us, as our research showed that the annual student tram pass in 2022/23 was £200, while the bus equivalent was £484.50 for the inner-city zone option and £727.60 for the further zone option. This stood out as a strong point of competitive advantage. They also discovered that cost is not a barrier, but it's a consideration, and we can speculate cost is more of a pressure for students.
- They also discovered that of those who are not familiar with the tram, people felt they need to know a bit more about the destinations on the route to inform why they would use it - showing us that educating the new students to the city on the tram network, and how to buy tickets and use the route planner through the NETGO! app was important.

The brief – scope of work

Our brief was to create a campaign to cover the duration of the Freshers' period (August to October 2022), including an activation phase at Freshers' events. This involved NET being at Freshers' events for three days at Nottingham Trent University over two campuses, two days at the University of Nottingham and four days across Nottingham colleges.

The brief asked us to think strategically about:

- The whole customer journey of the campaign – from pre-event, to at the event, through to post-event – to ensure joined up thinking throughout and a campaign that can live on past the events and Freshers' period.
- Exploring eye-catching and interactive stands for the events including offering free food or drink as giveaways, which based on their experience of seeing which other stands performed well previously, NET were confident students would respond well to and provide an opportunity for NET staff to talk to students.
- The amount of supervision required on the stand at events – so NET staff can concentrate on talking to students about the tram network, student pass and NETGO! app.
- Messaging being simple and straightforward, including consideration for international students.
- Ensuring messaging considers and encompasses the broad range of students being targeted, including new students versus existing students, and local/commuting students versus students new to the city.
- The approach to fair evasion messaging within the campaign including its weighting, sternness, and priority. We didn't want this messaging to feel negative or aggressive, whilst introducing themselves to new students, but at the same time, it's important to reduce fare evasion.



Our design

We designed a campaign with the lead line 'Smooth journeys with NET trams'. This enabled us to instantly create a picture of the benefits of using the tram – including how quick, easy and reliable it is for students (both universities are serviced by the tram network).

For our messaging, we creatively and strategically pushed NET's brand to create a strong foundation for the campaign. We developed a mechanic to start every headline with the word 'Get' which as well as being clear and dynamic, instantly conveys the idea of travel.

We focused our messaging around getting out and about around Nottingham to appeal to students who were ready to start socialising again after Covid-19, while introducing the tram and the benefits of using it for study and leisure. With the tram student pass significantly cheaper than the bus student pass, we made sure the cost was high up in the messaging hierarchy and presented it in terms of cost per day (60p, so less than a pound) rather than as a total amount (£200 - £250, depending on which discount was applied). We also included messaging that explained the breadth of destinations on the network.

We also introduced a new font called Mighty Mountain aimed specifically at students and edited it for a bespoke and fluid feel. Always presented in a large font size, it's ideal for strong, bold messaging and speaks to a younger audience in a way that NET's more corporate looking branding wasn't.

For the fare evasion messaging, we used a 'please play fair' approach and created a standard message for student communications to explain NET's zero tolerance policy in a clear, simple, straightforward, non-threatening way to tackle mistaken anecdotal beliefs around buying tickets.

Combined, these elements meant that everything we produced for the pre, during and post stages of the campaign was easily identifiable and works well whether viewed close up or from a distance, as NET use a lot of large format marketing materials.

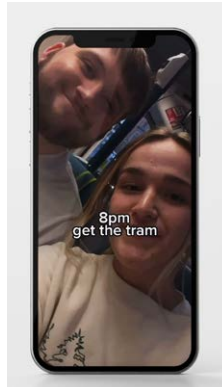


Our design

The campaign included the following stages of activity:

Pre-event – We created a breadth of social media assets, including a TikTok video featuring a trend at the time ‘Day in the life of...’ showing a Nottingham student going through their day and using the tram at various points. We produced press ads, outdoor, on tram advertising, emails for the universities and a printed door drop for student accommodation. All communications made students aware of the tram network, and the pass ticket price, with further reduction available at the NET Freshers’ stand.

At the event – We designed an event activation with a smoothie, giving free smoothies to anyone that downloaded the NETGO! app (or followed on socials if they already had the app). There were discount code cards given for a further £50 off. There were also free bottled water and sweets given out. And we held a ‘Guess



the Smoothie’ competition, with the chance to win Apple AirPods, where students tried the mystery drink and then submitted their three flavour guesses into a data collection web page along with their email addresses. The stand area had flags, pull ups, a bar area, gazebo and deck chairs, as well as t-shirts for the staff, all branded, so the area was very clearly NET and made a big impact as students approached.

Post-event – We created social media ads to announce competition winners and sent out a follow up email to the addresses collected and social media posts to let students know the Freshers’ discounting rate would be closing soon.



Key facts

These activities were delivered as a collaboration between us and NET, working only with third party suppliers, for print, merchandise and a caterer for the smoothies.

Dates

- We held the first meeting to discuss the brief on 3 May 2022.
- The campaign started with the printed flyers and the TikTok video going out on 8 August 2022.
- The first Freshers' event was held on Tuesday 20 September 2022.
- The campaign closed on 30 October 2022.

Design fees

£15,730

Results

Revenue from the sales of the Academic Year Student Pass increased by 95%

The sales of the annual student pass during the Freshers' period surpassed NET's ambitious targets – improving on pre-Covid sales in a year when the UK was still in recovery from the pandemic.

Previous sales in 2021 for the Freshers' campaign period were [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA]. The sales generated in our 2022 Freshers' period were [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA]. This is a 95% increase in revenue. It's also a 44% increase in revenue when compared to the last pre-covid year of 2019 [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA].

“This increase YoY represents a hugely successful campaign and when measured against the last proper pre-covid year of 2019, the c.45% increase in revenue shows how much better the presentation and offer has been put together and accepted by the student population.” (source: Net Board report).

Full Annual Academic Season Passes sold over the Freshers' period, from 1st of August to 29th of October for each year:

Year	Academic passes sold	Sales £	Covid impact
2017	1,155	[REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA]	Before Covid
2018	1,417	[REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA]	Before Covid
2019	2,028	[REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA]	Before Covid
2020	431	[REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA]	Largely restricted
2021	1,869	[REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA]	Partly restricted
2022	3,370	[REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA]	Post restrictions



Results

Increased discretionary travel up by 30% in campaign period

Discretionary travel is defined as covering five key categories: shopping, family or personal business, visits with family or friends, social or recreational gatherings, and medical or dental purposes (non-discretionary is classed as travel that takes place for things at a set time place, like work and studies). The large increase of 30% in discretionary travel in the freshers' period was considered by NET to be a great success of the 2022 campaign, and for them, indicates an increase in awareness and education on the tram network and the importance of buying a ticket. Considering the loss incurred from fare evasion of [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA] mentioned earlier, an increase in tram tickets being bought of 30% is a significant value shifted from lost earnings to revenue.



NETGO! app downloads and social media platforms follows

For app downloads and social media follows, the year on year effectiveness can't be measured as these were not key objectives from the previous years' agency briefs, so the starting place was 0 for those metrics. But NET were very happy with the numbers collected from our campaign based on what they usually achieve following activity:

- The average daily NETGO! app downloads is 276 downloads. This increased to a daily average of 664 for the campaign period, which is a 141% increase.
- The TikTok video we created was played 2,532 times. This is high performing compared to other campaigns, for example, the following five TikTok videos outside of our campaign were played 1,126 times, 692 times, 1,006 times, 990 times and 1,763 times.
- And 900 Instagram followers were gained - to give proportion to that, the NET's Instagram account has 3977 followers - so 23% of total followers were gained in the Freshers' campaign period.

Email addresses collected

In 2021, in the previous Freshers' campaign before ours, 2,000 email addresses were collected. In 2022 however, we collected 1,050 email addresses. The reason for this reduction was clear; NET's webpage used for collecting email addresses did not work when not connected to the internet, and connectivity was problematic throughout the events. We counteracted that issue this year (2023) with an online app that could collect email addresses without an internet connection and we collected 2,840 addresses through the 'Guess the smoothie' competition.

Wider impact results

Improved footfall and engagement

Our stand created a huge buzz - improving footfall and delivering greater opportunities for engagement and increased dwell time - with students queuing for free smoothies and to take part in the competition. The queues were unprecedented for NET and were continuous on each day and enabled NET staff to have richer, more meaningful, one-to-one interactions with students - to educate them about the tram network and benefits, discuss price comparisons between the bus, and directly address some of the mistaken perceptions highlighted by the research. NET believe these conversations are what led to increased education and awareness that increased discretionary passes bought. The image here shows the queue that was generated.

Uptake of model

NET were so pleased with the campaign's return on investment and awareness-raising impact that they decided to use the same campaign messaging and creative styling for their smaller scale 'Refreshers' campaign in January 2023, and the full 'Smooth journeys' campaign in September/October 2023. The results are still coming in, but the target was to increase revenue by 10%. Currently, with a week left of the campaign period, sales are at 3,733 sold, an increase of 363 passes, at a sales figure of [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA], which is an increase of [REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA] - and 20.6% - which is further evidence of the success of the effectiveness of the model we have created for NET's Freshers' campaign, rather than a one-off, or success from another influencing factor.

Investing in the marketing team

Following the success of the campaign and the revenue raised, NET's Tramlink board increased investment in the marketing team by increasing part time roles to be full time or more days, having proved to the board that the revenue they can create justifies the extra hours.



Increased budget investment for subsequent campaigns

Revenue from this campaign has justified larger marketing budgets for subsequent campaigns - having provided evidence that increasing the budget and our agency thinking time, helps create a more successful ROI generating campaign. It also improved NET's internal understanding of the value of strong creative and design. And whilst we have not been given an overall increase figure, the Head of Marketing said: "This campaign was definitely about having better proof of ROI but it was more than that - it was about proving that the money we do spend has been done so wisely."

Carbon footprint

The increase in the student tram passes and discretionary travel tickets sold means those students travelled using the carbon neutral tram, rather than the bus or in some cases cars, then this creates a reduction in carbon emissions in Nottingham city centre and surrounding areas. Each km per passenger on a bus has double the carbon emissions of the tram, and each km in a diesel or petrol car is three times that of a km on a tram (source: Statista, 2023).

Average grams of CO₂e per passenger km:

- Tram = 50 grams
- Electric car = 54 grams
- Average local bus = 102 grams
- Diesel/petrol car = 165 grams

Proof of effect and other influencing factors

Strong sales promotion

We felt from the beginning that we had a very strong price point to take the campaign to market. Having a reduced student pass price for the duration of the campaign, and a further reduction at the activation events, helped to generate interest in the pass, aside from our campaign design. However, the success of the campaign also lies in the strong foundation it created to connect with the target audience, lead with the cost benefit clearly in messaging – focusing on the cost per day to highlight affordability, share a broad range of additional messaging, and raise awareness of the tram and its benefits – before, during and after the Freshers' period. Previous campaigns and other agencies have benefited from the same strong sales promotion as they always run with a discounted academic pass for the Freshers' campaign, and they hadn't achieved the same results as our campaign.

Covid-19

We were mindful that the sales results of NET's previous campaign in 2020 and 2021 were massively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Many students stayed at home or studied remotely in their student accommodation during lockdowns, with some reluctant to socialise when restrictions were lifted. So, our success could simply indicate a returning to normal of travel and student behaviours. However, our results section showed we out-performed pre-Covid years and Freshers' events did take place in 2020 and 2021, and NET have confirmed they were busy with students, but they just did not have the success with sales conversions, or the rich conversations that led to increased awareness.

Increase in number of students in Nottingham

The student population has risen from 59,000 in 2016/17 to 71,500 in 2022/23, so this could indicate a reason for the increase in student pass sales. However, NET had a share of 1.9% in 2017 as season ticket holders to 5.2% in 2023. This is credited by NET to an increase in education and awareness, following the 2022 and 2023 Freshers' campaigns.

