by Sarah Myland Kaufman
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As the Metropolitan Tranportation Authority struggles with its newest round of financial and political woes, the agency is failing to consider a ripe opportunity for peripheral economic development: providing wireless Internet access, commonly called Wi-Fi (for wireless fidelity) on its commuter trains, the Metro-North and Long Island Railroads.

Wireless Internet access is proliferating worldwide, increasing by 145 percent (80 million users!) in 2003, helped along by a propagation of new digital technologies -- WiFi is now available on laptop computers, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and mobile phones.

While users grow accustomed to having Internet access, they demand more connections, including on their commutes. Market studies repeatedly indicate that ridership would increase tremendously if Wi-Fi were provided. The resource is already being provided for public transportation and commuter rail users in such major cities as London, Paris, Seattle, the Bay Area, Tokyo, and Chennai, India. Lufthansa and other airlines are also already offering Wi-Fi upwards of six miles in the air.

New York City, in comparison, provides Wi-Fi on no transportation mode other than the Hampton Jitney and the LimoLiner luxury bus to Boston. The MTA has responded to queries that it has no intention of providing wireless Internet resources.

But the benefits to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's roughly 12 million monthly train riders would be plentiful. Businesspeople could increase their individual productivity during the ride, which may be up to two hours long from some locales. Sorting through a plethora of new emails on the way to work, accessing the company intranet, or using new Internet-based technologies to make discounted international phone calls, all heighten productivity - so much so that in Sweden, a group has begun advocating for employers to consider commuter rail time as work hours, since employees conduct such a large amount of work during their ride.

The MTA's trains stop at 28 higher education campuses outside New York City proper. Because it is expected at most institutions that students receive information via email and/or course Web sites, these students surely would appreciate extra time for access. And the trains could also offer entertainment ranging from films, as provided for example by AtomFilms.com (headphones required, of course), to virtual visits to the art scene such as available at Swissart.net.

Expanding work or academic hours and providing such entertainment in this way could prove such a lure as to decrease automobile traffic into the city

Far from further isolating passengers from one another, it might actually have the absolute effect â€“ creating a kind of on-board online community. Hooked-in passengers could participate in networked activities by sharing music (legally) using radio station-like playlist broadcast technologies, play trivia and video games against one another, or use a localized Web-based job-hunting/dating/classifieds service, in which the network matches up potential employees/singles/apartment hunters through pre-completed surveys. (With matches nearby and in-person, convergences would play out faster and more faithfully).

But What Would It Cost?

Expenses are difficult to quantify, but studies of other deployments show an investment by the MTA would hardly dent its new $200 million rainy day fund. If the project still seems too expensive, consider air conditioning, which was seen as an unnecessary investment by train operators in the 1930s and 1940s. No one now questions the necessity of having invested in air-conditioning, and the same will surely be true eventually of Wi-Fi as well.

What's more, the MTA would quickly see a return on investments through new abilities to streamline its own processes, including enhanced train tracking, improved communications to headquarters and customers, heightened emergency communications resources (redundancy of communication modes is a key). Plus, the potential for mobile ticket collection (think a human EZ-Pass) would lessen paperwork and improve efficiency.

Revenue generation from Wi-Fi use would come in several forms. If the agency partners with one of the multiple wireless access providers, such as PointShot or Boingo, which require users to pay a relatively modest daily or monthly fee for unlimited Wi-Fi use, the agency could surely work out a financial gain. These returns are not minimal: Revenue generation from wireless hotspots is expected to reach $9 billion by 2010 according to industry research. Further income would be derived from direct online advertising, partnerships with music and movie downloading services, and subsidized Web-only discounts at locations serviced by the train line.

An investment in Wi-Fi then â€“ both on the train and, ideally, at the stations as well â€“ would generate revenue, increase customer satisfaction, and improve internal efficiencies. It would also help New York catch up to the other world-class cities that do this already. Is this likely to happen during its current period of fiscal chaos? No. But it would make sense to do so â€“ for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to show its customers it is thinking about their needs.

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