
Call A Bike: public bicycles in Germany

Topic

Public bicycles

Summary

Call a bike is a commercial public bicycle service that is offered by DB Rent, which is a subsidiary company of Deutsche Bahn (DB, German Rail). The service started in October 2001 in Munich. Meanwhile, it has been expanded to other German cities and is now also available in Berlin, Cologne and Frankfurt. 4,200 specially designed silver-red bicycles are available for rent in these cities from spring to fall. The scheme is designed for one way trips. The bicycles are not bound to a rack but can be left at the nearest crossing in a defined core area, as they have a lock mechanism installed at the bicycles themselves. Therefore they can be integrated in a trip chain with long distance rail or regional and urban public transport. To obtain access to the call a bike service, users have to register once and need to provide their credit card information or give a direct debit authorisation. After registration, the public bicycles can be unlocked by using a code that the user receives via cell phone (see technical description). DB rent charges 7 Cents per minute, holders of a Bahn Card (which offers discounts on rail trips) or a yearly public transport pass pay 5 Cents a minute and 24 hours cost 15 €. Currently the call a bike service is not financially self sustaining. However, it is not the goal of DB to make a profit of the service. It is rather aimed at a break-even and at the attraction of rail customers that use the call a bike service in a trip chain. Call a bike also provides a positive publicity effect for German Rail.

Case study

Public bicycles are innovative schemes of rental or free bicycles in urban areas. They differ from traditional leisure-oriented bicycle rental services as they provide fast and easy access and can be used for daily mobility. One way use is possible, both as monomodal trip and as intermodal extension in a public transport chain. Public bicycles can be seen as part of the public transport system and offer the user a highly flexible travel option for inner-urban trips.

Public bicycle schemes can be found in different forms across Europe. Earlier schemes, as the one still operating in Copenhagen, are relatively simple. They usually require a coin deposit to unlock a bicycle. Pick up and drop off is bound to racks located in public space. Meanwhile, public bicycle systems have diversified in their organisational layout, their business models, and the applied technology.

Call a bike belongs to a new generation of schemes, that can be distinguished by the following main features:

- Financing: Schemes that offer public bicycles free of charge, and others demanding a fee.

- Institutional set-up: Public bicycles offered by commercial operators, by public authorities or in a co-operation between both.
- Pick up and drop off locations: Bicycles may be bound at one or both end points of the trip to racks, locker boxes or attended stations, or it may be possible to pick up and leave the bicycle unbound in a defined area.
- Access technology: Different technological solutions for the check-out process are applied such as card systems or mobile phones (submission of a user code to unlock the bicycle).

Basic facts

Call a bike is a commercial public bicycle service that is offered by DB Rent, which is a subsidiary company of Deutsche Bahn (DB, German Rail). The service started in October 2001 in Munich. Meanwhile, it has been expanded to other German cities and is now also available in Berlin, Cologne and Frankfurt. 4,200 specially designed silver-red bicycles are available for rent in these cities from spring to fall. The scheme is designed for one way trips. The bicycles are not bound to a rack but can be left at the nearest crossing in a defined core area, as they have a lock mechanism installed at the bicycles themselves. Therefore they can be integrated in a trip chain with long distance rail or regional and urban public transport. To obtain access to the call a bike service, users have to register once and need to provide their credit card information or give a direct debit authorisation. After registration, the public bicycles can be unlocked by using a code that the user receives via cell phone (see technical description). DB rent charges 7 Cents per minute, holders of a Bahn Card (which offers discounts on rail trips) or a yearly public transport pass pay 5 Cents a minute and 24 hours cost 15 €. Currently the call a bike service is not financially self sustaining. However, it is not the goal of DB to make a profit of the service. It is rather aimed at a break-even and at the attraction of rail customers that use the call a bike service in a trip chain. Call a bike also provides a positive publicity effect for German Rail.

Users and stakeholders

Call a bike in 2004 had approx. 71,000 clients in Germany (+40% users compared to 2003) and around 380.000 trips have been made with the bicycles (+19%). Main users are, in the morning commuters that extent a public transport trip by bicycle, and in the afternoon and evening people that are using the bikes for shopping trips or to visit cinemas. It can also be observed that the use of the call a bike service reaches its peak on sunny days and on the weekends. Most users of call a bike are between 18 and 35 years old and frequent public transport users.

Main stakeholder of the call a bike scheme is DB Rent. There are close links to German Rail and their rail services. These links are operational but also

functional as call a bike is designed to offer the opportunity to extend a rail trip by bicycle.

Technical description

Call a bike uses a sophisticated technology for the check-out and returning process of the bicycles. Registered users call by mobile phone a number that is displayed on the bike. They receive a four digit code which is entered on a touch screen to release the lock, integrated in the bike. At his destination, the traveller leaves the bicycle at a crossroad, locked to a fixed object (e.g. traffic sign) and submits a return receipt code that appears on the display by mobile to DB Rent. The user also has to provide information about the location where he leaves the bike. The utilisation fee is charged on the user's credit card or automatically withdrawn from his bank account. Call a bike is a so-called smart bike, which enables to track who has been renting a bicycle, which reduces the risk of theft. To further minimise the risk of theft, the bicycles are specially designed with parts that do not fit a normal bike.

Implementation set-up

Call a bike is part of DB's strategy to provide value added mobility services to its customers apart from pure rail transport and to enable door-to-door mobility chains. Its subsidiary company DB Rent, which deals with leasing and fleet management for DB is taking a special role in the extension of the range of mobility related services. Currently DB Rent's mobility portfolio includes rental cars, car sharing, parking management, taxi booking from the train and availability at rail stations, traditional bicycle rental at about 160 rail stations and the innovative call a bike service.

The call a bike idea was originally conceived by an independent company in Munich, where it started in 2000. In its first version the system was based on a telephone booth network, where bicycles could be picked up and left within a defined area. When the company faced financial problems, DB bought the service in 2001, developed it further and extended it.

Future prospects

DB Rent is still expecting an increase in the number of call-a-bike users. A further expansion of the scheme to other large German cities is possible. The user group of multimodal travellers who are willing to combine different modes in a trip chain is growing. Andreas Knie, head of intermodal services at DB Rent, estimates that approx. 400,000-500,000 clients would in the short run be willing to use such services as DB car sharing or Call a bike, which are both intermodal products that can be used in a trip chain combined with a rail leg of the journey. He sees an even larger long term potential of 3-4 million clients in Germany.

Downloads

FactSheetCallABike(DE).pdf

Links

<http://www.callabike-interaktiv.de/kundenbuchung/>

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