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San Francisco contactless transit trial hailed a success

A pilot scheme that allowed commuters in San Francisco to use their NFC-enabled mobile phones to pay for rail fares and make retail payments has been hailed as a success, with participants embracing the technology.

The four month trial - which was launched by the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District (Bart) in partnership with First Data and VoVOtech saw high usage of Sprint handsets for rail fare and retail payments.

Customer satisfaction with the technology was high, with more than 80% of trial participants saying the mobile wallet application was easy to use.

During the pilot, which ran from January to May, participants took nearly 9000 trips on Bart - an average of 50 journeys per person. Users also topped up their Bart card balances more than 800 times - five times per participant - using the over-the-air (OTA) feature on their phones.

In addition, ViVOtech says participants tapped their NFC-enabled phones "several hundred times" against "smart" posters in Bart stations to receive directions to Jack in the Box restaurants - where they could pay with their handsets.

Explaining the popularity of the system, James Fang, board member, Bart, says: "The NFC-enabled phone simplifies their lives because they never need to dig for a Bart ticket again, and they can bypass those fumbling for change at the ticket machine, and instead, go directly through the faregates - knowing they always have the correct fare on their phones."

Earlier this year a similar trial was launched in London that allowed customers to use their mobile phones to pay for tube journeys and make small value purchases.

The London trial, which was conducted between November 2007 and May 2008, found that nine out of ten participants were happy using NFC technology on a mobile phone and 78% said they would be interested in using contactless services if available.

Furthermore, a similar pilot launched by a consortium of French banks, telcos and technology vendors last year reported customer satisfaction rates of above 90%.