

easyEverything: Variable Pricing in Internet Cafes

Annelies de Briune Client & Media Systems Laboratory HP Laboratories Bristol HPL-2002-13 March 6th , 2002*

internet cafe, variable pricing, multiservice internet M3I is looking into variable pricing for multiservice internet. Work has been done by the 6 partners of M3I to design and trial systems that enable differential charging for multiple levels of service. Variable pricing is already being used in the internet cafes of the easyGroup: easyEverything stores. The price in the easyEverything stores fluctuates depending how busy the store is. Thirtysix (36) customers of the internet stores have been interviewed about their use of easyEverything and their attitude towards variable pricing. This report describes the results of these interviews.

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Approved for External Publication

1 Introduction

M3I, Market Managed Multiservice Internet, is a project under the European Union's Fifth Framework Programme. M3I is looking into variable pricing. The easyGroup has opened internet cafes, easyEverything, with a variable pricing scheme. We went to two easyEverything stores to interview customers to get user feedback about variable pricing.

M3I

The goal of M3I is to design, implement and trial a next generation system that will enable internet resource management through market forces, specifically by enabling differential charging for multiple levels of service. The assumption is that by offering this capability to customers through greater choice over price and quality and reduced congestion, the value of internet services will be increased. For the network provider, flexibility can be improved and management complexity reduced, which might increase revenues.

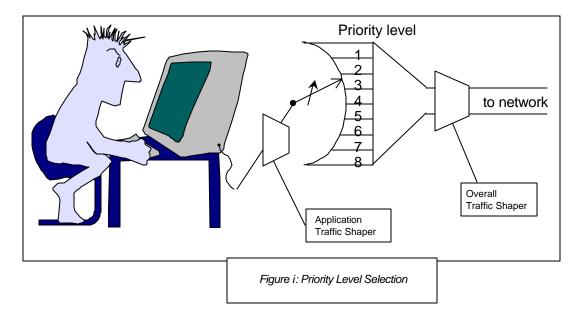
M3I believes that the present position whereby Internet Service Providers (ISPs) charge a flat rate for access to undifferentiated service levels and meet demand through over-provision of capacity, does not represent a sustainable business model. As basic access and simple services become commoditised, ISPs will differentiate across a wide range of sophisticated services and business models.

A study at the University of California at Berkeley (Altmann et al. 2000) shows demand is very sensitive towards different pricing structures and subjects in the INDEX experiments exploited the flexibility of advanced pricing schemes for their own advantage. The findings in the INDEX study confirm the existence of large variations in user demand.

Priorities

In the research labs of Hewlett-Packard (HPLabs) work is done on a scenario based on pricing a set of prioritised services that users can dynamically select. Each priority is implemented via DiffServ codepoint marked traffic and a strict pre-emptive queuing system. (H. Oliver, 2001)

The system provides different classes of service according to the different needs of different applications. The approach is to give the end user control over quality of service and price according to his utility for the services. In the basic scheme the user is offered a list of priority levels at which to send his traffic. Traffic sent at a higher level will be sent at a higher priority and at a higher price. The absolute quality of service of each priority level is not guaranteed, but will depend on the current network state. The differences in QoS are relative, may change in real-time and, on that basis, the user may choose to move up or down the levels accordingly, trading relative quality of service for price of service usage.



The pricing plan is straightforward. Each priority level is priced at a different rate. The prices are strictly increasing with regard to the priority. The usage of the different priority levels will be metered. This could be as the number of bytes transmitted, the number of packets transmitted, or the amount of time connected to the network.

easyEverything

With M3I looking into variable pricing for internet use, there was a need for a study in which people use their own, real money after conducting user tests in a lab environment at British Telecom (BT) (Hands et al. 2001). The easyGroup (www.easygroup.co.uk) has opened internet cafes in Europe and New York with a variable pricing scheme. The price in the easyEverything stores fluctuates depending how busy the store is.

Customer purchases Internet Access Credit at the counter. Depending on how busy it is in the store customers can get up to 6 hours of internet access for one pound during quiet hours while during peak hours the customer might only get 15 minutes access for one pound (see Appendix A).

By interviewing customers of two easyEverything stores data has been collected about variable pricing from customers spending their own money on internet access in London and Amsterdam.

2 Methods

In July 2001 we interviewed customers in the easyEverything store (eE) on Tottenham Court Road in London. In September we went to Amsterdam (Rembrandtplein) for more interviews to compare results and to gather more data at different times of the day. Caroline Gale of BT and I both interviewed customers inside the easyEverything stores. This report describes the 36 interviews I have done. Another report has been written for all (81) interviews (Gale et al. 2001).

In London we started interviewing at 9 A M and ended at 8 PM to get a good idea of the spreading of the customers over the day. In Amsterdam we interviewed people on Sunday afternoon from 3 until 6 PM and on Monday from 7 AM. The reason we choose Sunday afternoon and early morning was to find out whether there were different kind of users at the different times in the store. We interviewed people at a table inside the stores. All interviews were recorded on minidisk. The recordings were transcribed at BT Labs.

The interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes. During these 15 minutes the subjects were asked questions about their internet use, their experience with easyEverything (eE) and their opinion about variable pricing. The interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

In both stores we put up a notices on ticket machines and the desk that interviews were taken place in the store and that people could get a $\pounds 5/f$ 10 gift voucher if they wanted to give us 20 minutes of their time. Some people came up to us after reading the notices. We tried to get other subjects by asking people for their participation on their way out of the stores. It wasn't always easy to get subjects for the interviews since people were leaving in a hurry and a few times the language barrier was so big that the people didn't understand the request. The fact that people could volunteer to participate, that a lot of people didn't have time to stop, the language barrier and because we only interviewed in two stores makes that the sample for this research is not representative for the whole population.

Subjects

In London I interviewed 18 subjects, 12 male and 6 female customers. All subjects had more than 2 years internet experience. Two (2) of the subjects were travellers from the USA and only used eE during their trip to Europe. All others worked or lived in London, even though at least 7 people only lived in London temporary and originally came from other countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Sweden and Mexico. Some were in London to work or they were looking for work and a few were studying in London. Seven (7) subjects were unemployed of whom 6 came to the eE store to look for work on the internet and to send out letters and CVs. Five (5) of the subjects worked in London and 5 studied in London.

I interviewed another 18 customers in Amsterdam, 10 females and 8 males. These subjects all had more than 2 years experience with internet as well. Seven (7) of the subjects were travellers, 6 live in Amsterdam temporary and are foreigners either studying or working in Amsterdam and 5 subjects were locals. All travellers and foreigners living in Amsterdam had internet access at home in their home country. Only 1 respondent was unemployed because he had been involved in an accident.

All foreigners who lived in London have internet at home in their home country but not at their London address. Three (3) subjects came to the eE store because their internet connection at home was down that day and 2 students had internet at school/university but that connection wasn't very good. The subjects who had internet at access at work came to eE for personal use. Eight (8) subjects didn't have internet at home or at work and eE or other internet cafes were the only places for them to get access to the internet.

3 Results

London: Half (9) of the subjects came to the eE store for internet access more than once a week of which 5 subjects said they come (almost) daily. Three (3) out of the 5 subjects who said they come (almost) daily have a month pass which gives unlimited access for 30 days for £15. The other 2 daily customers use a top up card. They were interested in the month pass but one subject said he didn't buy one because the month passes are only valid in the store on Tottenham Court Road and he likes to go to other eE stores as well. The other subject will consider a month pass. For more information about the different passes in London TCR, check Appendix C.

Amsterdam: In Amsterdam people could only buy tickets for f 2,50. There was a special offer: Get 24 hours while you pay for 15 hours. Only 2 subjects bought a special offer ticket. Most subjects said they come to eE almost every day or at least twice a week. Subjects who came less often either check their email at a library or they usually have internet at home, which was down at the time of the interview. Two (2) subjects said they are interested in getting a month pass if eE would introduce it in Amsterdam.

London: Two (2) subjects were travellers from the USA who only use eE when travelling in Europe. They both visited eE stores in different European countries and they liked the concept of eE. Two (2) other subjects come to eE every fortnight. They didn't think eE is better or cheaper than other internet cafes and one them checks his email almost daily in an internet cafe closer to his home in Camden. A few subjects (3) came to eE because their internet connection at home was down and they needed to send an urgent email. One (1) subject accessed the internet at the eE store for the first time on the day of the interview.

Amsterdam: All but 1 subject come eE for internet access and don't use any other internet cafes. The 1 subject comes to eE to use the telephone and he occasionally surfs the web when he is in the store but he has internet at the university where he studies. Reasons mentioned to come to eE are that it is in a convenient location, it is cheap, there are a lot of computers so you don't have to wait and it is easy.

London: All subjects said they come to eE to check their email. Some surf the web as well, especially the foreigners in London who are unemployed surf the web looking for work. Other people do their banking, check travel sites, read the paper, surf for sports, gay adds, flats or what's on in London, etc. The subjects looking for work sent out emails with their CV attached Only one subject comes in for downloading games and one of the travellers from the USA sometimes sends over text files for work. Nobody I interviewed uses the internet for Voice-over-IP (VoIP), video conferencing or other applications that need a high quality of service.

Amsterdam: In Amsterdam the main reason to use eE was to read and send emails as well. A lot of subjects surf the web for news and some chatted. They seem to surf a little bit more in Amsterdam than in the London store. Two (2) subjects came to eE to update their homepages. The phone is been used a lot in Amsterdam, 1 subject only comes to eE to use the phone and some subjects mentioned they use the phones to call home to England. Again nobody used VoIP, videoconference or other applications that need a high quality of service.

London: Most of the subjects could see a point in the concept that people who use more bandwidth pay more money so people who only use text emails can pay less, even though a few mentioned that the price was low enough and doesn't need to be lower. One subject mentioned that it would be good to pay for time as well for the amount of bytes/bandwidth someone uses. Another subject said he would happily pay more when he needs to download something and if they can guarantee a faster download time. He gave the example of having a few (super) fast computers in the store for which you have to pay more to get a better speed.

Amsterdam: All subjects said that internet access in the store is very cheap and that they don't mind paying extra to use other applications. Hardly anyone used other applications and nobody needed a faster connection in the store.

London: Most subjects (11) were happy with the speed of the internet at the eE store, they said the speed was good and some said it was exceptional. Especially the subjects who came in the morning were content with the speed and one subject said she always comes early because she gets the best speed in the morning. Six (6) subjects, all of them were in the store in the afternoon when it was very busy, said the speed could be better. One subjects mentioned that sometimes it is impossible to send an email with a 4 page Word attachment in the afternoon and another subject said the speed wasn't much better than his 56k modem connection at home.

Amsterdam: There were no complaints about the speed of the internet connection in Amsterdam. Everybody was very happy with the speed and some subjects said they come to the store even when they have access at home because of the speed.

London: Most subjects come to eE whenever it is convenient for them. They are either in the neighbourhood, pass they store or they come after work. They are all aware of the variable pricing and that they can get more minutes for £1 if they come certain hours, but most of the subjects come when they have time. Most of them liked the idea that they can come at a time when they get more time for their money but work, convenience and being in the neighbourhood were more determining factors to come to a store than the pricing scheme. Only 1 subject comes to eE early in the morning because he gets a good rate. Two (2) subjects with a month pass used to come at a time that they got a good rate but they don't need to think about that anymore since the month pass gives a user unlimited use for 30 days.

Amsterdam: Convenience is also the main reason for customers to come to the store at certain times in Amsterdam. We did interview subjects who do come early in the morning for better value early Monday morning. There were only 5 people in the store at that time of day. One guy said he comes every morning at 8:55, 5 minutes before the fixed price of f2,50 for 150 minutes ends. In the afternoon a few subjects said they'd come in for urgent emails but that they usually come in the evening to surf the web and sit down to do their email.

London: The different pricing structures and different passes weren't clear to all subjects. Some people mentioned that eE could advertise the different passes more clearly and that is confusing that there are different deals in different stores. Not all of the subjects knew about the month passes and 24 hours passes and they were surprised when I told them there are different pass-options at the eE store on

Tottenham Court Road. Some showed interest in either the month or 24 hours pass, but another subject mentioned that there is no need for more variation because they already get good value for money at eE. This was the subject who comes in early in the morning to get better value than at busy hours. One subject mentioned that the variable pricing is a good idea but that they shouldn't make it too complicated.

Amsterdam: In Amsterdam there were no different passes. Two (2) subjects showed interest in a month pass if they would introduce it in Amsterdam. Special offers were not very clear since subjects acted surprised when I told them about the special offer. Not everybody was aware of the variable pricing scheme in Amsterdam.

London: There are a few subjects who don't care about the price at all. That are mainly the subjects who come every fortnight (2) or less (3 with internet connection down at home and 2 travellers). Other people come certain times because they can't come any other time because of their work. Nobody would come in the middle of the night even if they would get free access. Two (2) subjects mentioned that the price does influence their behaviour in eE. One said that he came in for an urgent email while he didn't have anything to do at work. He said he'd come back later when he would get a better rate to do the rest of his email. One girl mentioned she once surfed at night and that she possibly surfed a bit longer because she got a better deal. She also mentioned that she does more on the internet at home but not at eE.

Amsterdam: All subjects said that internet access in the eE store is very cheap. The subjects who were aware of the variable pricing said that the difference in price is not big enough to change their behaviour. These subjects didn't know that there was a fixed price at night between 1AM and 9AM.

London: Most subjects think variable pricing is a good idea. One (1) subject said variable pricing is not fair and prefers a flat rate with the same price for everybody. He also mentioned that different priorities would be too much to think for him. Somebody else mentioned that variable pricing and different priorities are good as long as it clear and transparent for the user. He likes it that at eE you pay in advance ('pay-as-you-use'). Another subject mentioned that she used to come early but that changed after using eE for a while and she said that the price differences aren't that big anymore as they were a few years ago. She had a month pass sodoesn't have to look at the time anymore.

Amsterdam: The subjects in Amsterdam agree with the Londoners that variable pricing is a good idea even though not all subjects make the best use of it. After explaining the pricing scheme to ignorant subjects, 5 of them said that they might change the time they come to the store to get a better deal. Three (3) subjects were in the store early because they get more minutes for their money in the morning while another 3 subjects come early because they like it quiet. Coming before 9 o'clock in the morning seemed a bit too early for some subjects. Most subjects come to the store at a time convenient for them and they think internet access in the store is very cheap at any time so they don't see any need to change their behaviour.

London: Three (3) subjects were very positive about the possibility for different priorities when sending big files. These subjects all send big files for work and

wouldn't mind paying extra when they need higher quality of service. Even though most subjects said variable pricing is a good idea, not many benefit form the variable pricing scheme at eE because they only come at times convenient for them. Some of the subjects wanted more flexibility while others mentioned that they already get good value for money and that there is no need for more variation. Even though hardly any of the subjects said they come to eE because of the variable pricing, most of them said it was nice to know that you could come and get more minutes for your pound. The same was said for priorities at home, most of the subjects thought it is a good idea but they might use it themselves because they use the internet mainly for text emails.

Amsterdam: Most subjects in Amsterdam said that they prefer a flat rate at home but that variable pricing in the eE internet café is a good idea. They get good value for money and none of the subjects use applications which need a better quality of service, so multiservice internet in the store is not necessary.

4 Summary & discussion

I interviewed 18 customers in an easyEverything internet café in London and again 18 in Amsterdam for M3I about variable pricing in the easyEverything internet cafes.

In London the price for internet access was approximately £1 for 20 minutes, the prices didn't vary much while we were in the store. In Amsterdam customers could buy tickets for $f_{2,50}$ which gave them at least 28 minutes. The Amsterdam store has a fixed price at night of $f_{2,50}$ for 150 minutes.

In London almost half the subjects were foreigners living in England for a year or two on a work visa. They travelled around Europe and were looking for work in London. In Amsterdam we spoke to foreigners who lived in the city as well, but they seemed to have moved to Amsterdam for a short period for either study or work.

In London people didn't seem to care much about variable pricing and people came to the shop at a time convenient for them. Both in London and Amsterdam people thought variable pricing is a good idea but in Amsterdam people seem to take advantage of variable pricing a little bit more than in London.

The foreigners living in London came to the store to check email and to look for work while in Amsterdam people were checking email, surfing the web more for news and they came to the store to use the telephones. People in Amsterdam were online longer than in London and were more positive about the speed of the connection. Email was the main reason to come to the stores for in both cities.

Almost all subjects like the idea of variable pricing in the easyEverything store but they didn't use the eE pricing scheme to get better value for their money. In Amsterdam people seemed to be more interested in using the pricing scheme to their advantage than in London. Even though we interviewed at different times of the day in London and Amsterdam, the subjects in Amsterdam showed more willingness to come at different times for better value. Some people even mentioned changing the times that they usually come to a cheaper time.

Subjects mentioned variable pricing is a good concept but people do go to the store when it is convenient for them. To change people's behaviour a stronger incentive is needed because the price was low anyway. During the day the price differences are too small to come at times less convenient.

Speed is an important issue and some subjects mentioned that time = money and in London subjects said they wouldn't mind paying for a faster connection at home and some wouldn't mind paying more for sending big files over the internet or pay extra when they need to download a file or program in the easyEverything internet cafes.

The pricing scheme at the eE store wasn't very clear to the subjects and when working with variable pricing it seems important that the customers get clear and transparent information so the pricing schemes don't get confusing.

Conclusions

People come to the easyEverything internet cafes because they are in convenient locations, they are big so you don't have to wait for a computer, they come for the fast speed and it is cheap and simple. People have a positive attitude towards variable pricing but for most people convenience is a more important factor than the price of the internet access. More or different incentives are needed for people to change their behaviour, especially when the overall price for internet access is regarded as very low and when the prices don't vary very much.

References

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Appendix A

Http://www.easyEverything.com

21 cafes worldwide, 8,315 PCs available, 24 hours a day, every day The price in the easyEverything stores fluctuates depending how busy the store is.

easyEverything's pricing scheme is aimed to:

- provide you with the cheapest Internet access around, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- reduce the queues during the peak periods

The price now fluctuates depending upon how busy the shop is. Remember, you never pay more than your logon rate at each visit. If the rate decreases below your logon rate, you automatically receive extra time for that visit. Please see the screen at the front counter, which details how much Internet access credit you receive for your money. This rate gets updated every 5 minutes.

ABOUT INTERNET ACCESS CREDIT

Why?...better value and more convenient!

Use your Internet credit immediately or save it for later use anytime 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

You never pay more than your logon rate at each visit, even if the general rate increases!

If current rate decreases below your logon rate, you automatically receive extra time! Should the rate increase, you will never pay more than your logon rate.

How do I do it?...3 easy Steps

Surfing the Word Wide Web at **easyEverything** is a bit like buying a phone card for use on a mobile or pay telephone network:

1. Purchase as much Internet Access Credit as you like from the front counter of an **easyEverything** store.

2 Log-on to any available PC by entering the unique User ID shown on your ticket, followed by a password of your choice;

3. Start Surfing!

A video monitor at the front of the store (which is updated every five minutes) will give you an indication of how many minutes of Internet access your credit currently buys you, and while you are surfing a banner along the bottom of the screen will show you the actual in-store price and how much credit you have remaining on your ticket. Please note that you are buying a fixed amount of credit to access the Internet, and not a fixed amount of time. How long that credit lasts will depend on whether you surf at peak or off-peak times.

Pricing Principles

easyEverything operates a "dynamic pricing system" which aims to

- provide you with the cheapest and best value-for-money internet access around, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week;
- keep queues to a minimum during peak periods.

Our prices are either:

- Fixed for a specific time period (e.g., £2 for 30mins any time between 12:00 15:00), or
- Variable depending on how busy the store is.

These pricing principles are very similar to those used in other service industries, such as airlines, hotels and car rental companies.

Prices Changes

While you are surfing the web, a banner along the bottom of the screen will show you the current in-store price (how many minutes your credit currently buys), and how much credit you have remaining on your ticket.

The price of your session will be capped at the price you logged on at: it will never be more than this price.

This means that if the in-store price decreases, you will automatically receive extra time. You will not however, receive less time if the in-store rate increases.

Internet Access Credit

- Internet Access Credit can be purchased at any time;
- You can also top up your account at any time, in multiples of the minimum purchase (see table above) providing your account has some remaining credit;
- Your Internet Access Credit expires 28 days after your last log-on or top-up payment;
- If you wish to continue using the same User ID and Password, simply remember to top-up your account while you have some credit remaining, and within 28 days of your last log-on or top-up payment.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q How much does it cost to surf the Internet at easyEverything?A Depending on when you visit one of our storesyour credit may buy you anything between 15 minutes to 6 hours Internet access.

Q When are the peak and off-peak times, and thus the cheapest times to surf? A There is no definitive answer to this question, as peak and off-peak times can differ from hour to hour, day to day, store to store and country to country. As a general rule, the most popular times of the day are the afternoons and early evenings, while midnight to midday (00:00 - 12:00hrs) is the ideal time for the budget-conscious. From time to time, you may even find internet access free overnight.

Appendix B

INTRODUCTION

- Can you spare some time for an interview about easyEverything
- Giving you voucher for HMV
- Have you been in an easyEverything before today?
 - If first time maybe subject can't give us valuable answers?
- Give you a cup of tea or coffee & a cake, max 20 minutes
- Do you mind if I record it?

GET COFFEE OR TEA MINIDISK END SEARCH (make sure you're at the end) MICROPHONE ON

1. [Objective: Getting subjects to start talking]

Do you live around here? Yes: How often do you come here?

Have you ever been to another easyEverything store?

No: Are you travelling?

Have you been to this store before?

Have you ever been to another easyEverything store?

2. [Sample questions]

Do you have internet access elsewhere? (School/work/home) **Yes:** How long (in years) have you had internet access?

What do you use the Internet for At home:

At school/work:

Is there anything you'd like to use the internet for at home but don't? What is it & why? (Cost and quality issues may arise here)

Locals only >> Why do you come here?

No: Why not?

(Explore any issues to do with cost & quality - e.g. do you have a computer or is modem access unacceptably poor quality compared with work LAN? Are call costs perceived as too high?)

What would make them want to get access at home?

Explore any issues that arise (e.g. by asking 'why?' or 'can you tell me a bit more about that?'

3. [Exploring the relative importance of cost and quality/acceptability] Do you go to other internet cafes? Yes: What do you like/dislike about easyEverything compared to other internet cafes? No: Why only eE? What have you done here? Emailing, FTP, chatting? Have you used any other applications like Word or use the printer? Do you ever use internet for video conferencing, media streaming or FTP? What do you think of the speed of the internet here in easyEverything? Is this fast enough (is the quality acceptable)? Have you considered getting fast access at home via ISDN, ADSL or cable (how much are individuals prepared to pay for high quality)? Would you like to have the option in the easyEverything store of paying a higher price and getting a better or faster service? (think FedEx) And would you like to have the option of paying a lower price and getting a slower connection when you're sending simple text emails? Would you pay more for some things than other (like plane tickets - change your dates or pay peak rate, or wait with phone calls until peak time is over and the cheaper rate starts)?

4. [About easyEverything pricing]

Explain a bit about single logon, standard (multiple logon), 24 hours & month passes if necessary

What kind of ticket did you buy for this session?

Did you top up your ticket with a pay-as-you-go application to use Word or a printer?

Have you considered buying another ticket? Do you know which ticket would be best value for you (and explain why)?

How long have you been online during your last session? Did you use up all your credit or not (how many minutes did you get for £2)?

How long are you usually online?

Do you keep an eye on the time while you're online here? Do you like to get the feedback about how much time you have left?

What factors influence you what time of the day you use easyEverything? (Fit use around work hours, happen to pass, urgent matters, they've learned when it tends to be cheapest)

Would you go online even if it's busy and you only get 15 minutes for £2? (Peak rate)

Would you come at night because it might be for free if it is not busy?

Have you ever gone away and come back later because you didn't get enough time for your money?

Did you ever have to queue when wanting to use the internet? How long are you prepared to wait?

What do you think of the variable pricing in the easyEverything stores?

Can you see something like this working at home?

Example >> low flat rate for basic internet access with options to pay extra for better quality: Higher priority, higher price (compare with FedEx)

THANK YOU - TURN MICROPHONE OFF - GIVE VOUCHER

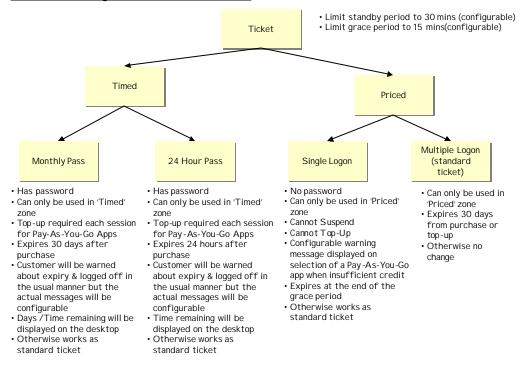
Appendix C

Broadly, an analysis of the new requirements for ticket types show that there are actually 2 types of ticket within the proposed billing model.

This 'ticket type' is defined as either 'Timed' (for the premium rate tickets) or 'Priced' (for the discounted passes). Each of these ticket types has required characteristics for customer usage (i.e. the behaviour of the customer workstation session) and for operational purposes (i.e. how the tickets are to be implemented and monitored).

The diagram below shows the characteristics of each ticket type in terms of any differences that the customer will experience during their workstation session when using that ticket.

Ticket Usage Characteristics



Note: these tickets are only available in the store on Tottenham Court Road where easyEverything ran an experiment with different tickets at the moment of the interviews.