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Autor: Hoekstra, George
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MOBILITY SWOPSHOP! George Hoekstra

Photos: George Hoekstra

On the last Saturday in October and the first one in November, a very unusual promotion was held in the Zürich area. Swiss Carsharing Operator "Mobility" made a special offer, too good to refuse: exchange one car (yours) for 1850 others... and participate in combined mobility as well. Instead of the car, you get a Season ticket for all public transport in Greater Zürich for every day use and Carsharing for those few times you really need to have the use a car! The "mechanics" were made as simple as possible: bring your car to the exchange point, where experienced technicians will take a good look at it. Based on their report, Mobility will then make you a favourable offer. If you accept it, you can leave the car right there and Mobility will take care of all the paperwork. In return, you will get:

1. A season-ticket for the Greater Zürich area, valid from that day, for you and your family;
2. Membership in Mobility Carsharing. This will include credits, which will depend on the car's value;
3. A portion of the sum in hard cash!

I wanted to know if anybody would take up this offer, and why, so I decided to take a look. On the 28th of October I made my way to the garage in Schlieren, near Zürich. The Schweizerische Wagonfabrik, makers of the famous Schlieren bogies, at one time had its factory in the town; there still is a "Wagonstrasse". As I got to the garage about half an hour before opening, there were already quite a few cars lined up!

First of all, identity checks on both the car and owner. Then the basic value was established, according to the widely used "Eurotax-blue" tariff. Then the car was thoroughly checked inside and out. Every bump and scratch is deducted from the basic value. Then the motor is checked, together with the lights, brakes, etc. On the lift, the steering mechanism and all the wheels are checked for play, checks are made for leaks and loose equipment. Any fault will lead to

a further deduction of value. While they were waiting, I asked them what prompted them to get rid of their supposedly beloved car. A few did not want to answer, which is fair enough, but most of them were glad to tell me.

The most frequent reason given was: "it is getting too expensive for the few times I actually use it". Other reasons included: "if you want to sell your car to a garage, without buying a new one, they are not interested or give you a bad deal"; "this is my second car, keeping two cars is too expensive"; "I live in the middle of Zürich, having a car in town is a nightmare". Then, from two elderly couples: "we are getting too old to drive in today's traffic" - a very courageous statement, not many elderly people realise themselves when it is time to stop. And most importantly, almost everybody mentioned the excellent state of public transport in the Zürich Area: "You can get almost anywhere, all day". If you want to get people out of their cars, this is the only way; good public transport has to be there first.

The result of the promotion was very positive: on both Saturdays combined, 116 cars turned up, of which no less than 59 (= 50%!!) were exchanged. The ones that left their car at the garage - there was even a family with a small child in a stroller - only had to walk 200 yards up the road to catch a bus to the centre of Zürich. And remember, they were already issued with their season-tickets! The Carsharing part works as follows: you get an electronic key and a code number. If you need a car, you get on the Internet and reserve a car at one of the 1000 distribution points - many adjacent to stations. Once you get there, find your car (number plate) and hold your electronic key-card to the box behind the windscreen. If this is the right car, the doors are unlocked, and you are off! The costs obviously vary with the type of car, but for a Renault Mégane II the charge is SFr 4.00 (£1.70) per hour plus 68 centimes per km for the first 100 km (£0.45/mile for first 60 miles). Prices are less at night, at weekends and with special offers.