

A new approach to connecting with riders, increasing Web traffic

By Joey Campbell, Managing Editor

Communicating with the public is perpetually challenging and simultaneously critical to transit authorities. More often than not, marketing departments in transit do not have the budget to utilize the broadest of media, but are still held accountable for boosting public awareness and fostering good customer relations.

Always eyeing the bottom line, agencies have tried everything from mail to press releases to door-to-door brochures. But only in recent years have the low-cost benefits of Websites and online media made a substantial impression on communication efforts.

E-subscription management

Today, nearly every transit authority uses the Internet to post service information and news updates. Playing off the popularity of Websites, e-mail subscription programs have become an effective way for agencies to market services and build solid relationships with riders.

For instance, the GovDelivery e-mail subscription management system, offered by St. Paul, Minn.-based GovDocs, allows Website visitors to subscribe to receive automated alerts, which can communicate important messages by e-mail, PDA or cell phone.

The system works well with transit applications, as riders simply visit an agency's Website and register for the service. After that, whenever service information is changed, riders receive e-mail alerts that redirect them to the Website for more information. Alerts can be sent wirelessly to portable devices, which is handy for riders on the run when their bus is running late.

E-mail subscription management has three primary benefits for transit



The Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District in Portland, Ore., has built an e-mail subscriber base of 20,000 since early 2003.

agencies: it greatly improves customer service, it increases Website traffic and it helps increase ridership. Rider benefits, of course, are self-evident.

Results in the transit arena

The system is currently being used by several transit authorities, including the Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District (TriMet) in Portland, Ore.

TriMet subscribers receive personal e-mail alerts regarding schedule changes on more than 100 different routes. If they want, they can also get alerts to transit-specific news, board meetings, light rail schedules, press releases and job openings.

One of the biggest advantages to the system, says Kim Duncan, executive director of marketing and customer service for TriMet, is that it's fast and easy to implement. "GovDelivery is a turnkey solution that put us in business right away and improved our customer service efforts."

Since implementing its e-mail subscription management system in

February 2003, TriMet has sent out hundreds of thousands of targeted e-mail alerts to a list of more than 6,500 subscribers. Currently, 115 subscription options are offered to Website visitors.

Additionally, TriMet's Web marketing initiatives have merited national acclaim. Its Website was selected by the Federal Transit Administration as one of the nation's best transit information sites last year.

As transit authorities continue to focus on increasing and improving communications with riders in a cost-effective way, this technology seems to be growing in popularity. Other agencies that have implemented similar programs include Sound Transit in Seattle and the Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada (RTC) in Las Vegas.

"By adding wireless alerts, we are offering additional options that keep riders informed and encourage use of our system," says Jacob Snow, general manager of the RTC.