

Make Business Part of Your Transit Business

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Developing customer-centric service and developing closer relationships between rural transit and the local business community is one of National RTAP's 10 Strategic Imperatives for the Future of Rural Transit.

Rural transit managers think of citizens groups, human service agencies, and elected officials when considering stakeholders and partners, but often overlook another important and potentially-profitable source of partners: local businesses. In big cities, small towns, and rural areas, transit service can be a vital resource connecting workers to major employers and educational opportunities. A well-run and business-savvy rural transit system can even be part of an area's economic development plan. It just takes an effort to connect with and respond to the needs of the local business community and a focus on becoming customer-centric businesses and their employees and customers.

The National Rural Transportation Assistance Program (National RTAP) has a five-part webinar series focused on how rural transit can thrive and ensure a solid future by becoming more customer-centric for business. The

program has several technical briefs and presentations online to assist rural transit agencies in serving the transit needs of industrial and commercial employers. These materials offer a guide to understanding what being customer-centric means in this context, reasons rural transit can be a key asset for area businesses, and 10 steps for improving the business focus of rural transit. Let's explore them now.

A key strategy for the future of transit

Becoming customer-centric and developing closer relationships between rural transit and the local business community is one of National RTAP's *10 Strategic Imperatives for the Future of Rural Transit*. National RTAP defines a customer-centric focus as "how to get closer to customers to better serve their mobility needs, and how to do so in a manner that turns them into apostles for your rural transit system." This approach means making transit an integral part of the community, rather than just a service. Good connections with local economic development agencies and the Chamber of Commerce, as well as the business community itself, are a must. Businesses must have a seat at the table concerning the community's transit system, and it is up to transit agencies to establish those relationships.

Rural transit and local economic development

Transit has become an important consideration for business leaders throughout the nation as fuel prices climb. Rural transit managers can offer major businesses a transportation alternative to keep their workforce moving and productive. RTAP lists the following reasons rural transit is important to business:

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4) Consider customer input. All transit agencies should measure overall customer satisfaction levels, expectations and performance on an ongoing basis through customer-service assessments. The goal of this is to continue improving by inserting the “voice of the customer” into everyday operations.

5) Improve customer service by using and sharing data. Look for ways to communicate that your agency takes customer service seriously. One idea is to share customer service scores with agency staff and board members, the stakeholders and the public. Examples of customer service-related data are the number or percentage of on-time arrivals, number of vehicle breakdowns,

number of passenger complaints and results from an on-board survey, conducted periodically.

6) Explore un-met needs. Identify un-met needs by talking to community leaders, riders and prospective riders. There are many low-cost ways to tackle this task, such as partnering with a radio station or newspaper to gather information, setting up a Facebook page for input, or asking riders to fill out an on-board survey. Use the information gathered to identify un-met needs and create new partnerships.

7) Consider customer service a full time job. It takes time to build a customer service culture. The goal is to have

everyone thinking about customer needs, from the bottom up—and from the top down—thinking and practicing customer service with each action taken.

Conclusion

Customer service is extremely important in all aspects of operating a rural transit system. If riders are shown that you are there to serve them, they will return, spread the word, and new customers will be more likely to use public transportation.

For more information regarding the topic, read the National RTAP technical service brief referenced in the Source on page 8. ●

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- Rural transit provides a direct link to workers who are often spread over large geographic areas.
- Businesses usually don't want to operate a transit service for workers, and turn to rural transit providers to provide the efficient, cost-effective service they need.
- Businesses want to support the local economy; having the business community promote and use rural transit is a clear and highly-visible way to do this.
- Businesses want the communities they locate in to be vibrant and therefore are motivated to contribute to the local quality of life.
- Rural transit provides vital links to neighboring communities and tribal lands, links beyond the local community that business interests appreciate more than most others.

When looking at these core reasons, it is easy to see why rural transit can be a vital resource for local business. Rural transit can and should pursue relationships with local businesses. National RTAP provides guidance for a well-thought plan of action, outlined below.

Steps for improving the business focus of transit

National RTAP lists 10 easy steps to assist rural transit operators in reaching out to their local business communities. While each transit manager should adapt and tailor these steps to fit their agency's situation, these steps are a great starting point toward a proactive plan. The 10 steps, with tips, are listed below:

1) Put on your best suit. Develop a brief presentation that tells your story and includes case studies where transit

has effectively partnered with business. National RTAP can assist transit operators with obtaining such case studies.

2) First stop: Visit the recommenders. Local chambers of commerce and economic development departments are vital resources for business development, and can help transit operators refine their presentations and put them in touch with key businesses.

3) Second stop: Visit likely prospects. Identify the largest employers in your region and visit them personally.

4) Keep an open mind. The greatest needs of a business may not have immediately clear links to transit, so the ability to just listen can be an asset. Make your own luck, and don't be afraid to ask deeper questions of business leaders.

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5) Be creative. A challenging problem is a great opportunity for a creative solution—one that can come out of dialogue between you and business leaders.

6) Crawl, walk, run. The best approach is to start small—with new service that meets the needs of a business, and then slowly build on that success. This enables easy experimentation and keeps any funding and operations risks to a minimum.

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Rural transit operators throughout the country are putting into practice the National RTAP's 10 steps for improving their customer-centric and business related focus. National RTAP notes several rural transit systems that showcase how to be creative in cultivating business relationships. Here are three examples:

Kings Area Rural Transit (KART) is an example of how to approach likely prospective businesses that may be interested in partnering with rural transit. Residents in rural portions Southern California's San Joaquin Valley needed better transportation options to get to their jobs on farms, state-run correctional facilities and other regional employers; many impoverished farm workers depended on unsafe and unreliable vehicles to get to their jobs. Workers also needed long-distance commute options that would also be available during off-peak shift hours. KART's solution was to start a vanpool program with rural employers that could safely and reliably serve workers' varied needs that involved multiple and often-changing work sites and non-traditional working hours.

Blue Ridge Community College of rural Virginia needed to be creative to meet the transportation needs of students and faculty. The college is located in a rural area between the small towns of Harrisonburg and Staunton, and needed a public transit option. Though they needed special service, Blue Ridge had little funding; their solution was to partner with a local rural transit operator to obtain the funds and service they sought. The rural transit operator could use federal and state dollars to fund 68 percent of the new service if it was a general public bus service. Most stops on the new route were on the college campus and in the most populated areas of the neighboring towns. Both towns were transfer stations tied into local bus systems. The successful service runs two buses 15 hours a day, carrying 4,000 people a month to the college.

Augusta Health of Staunton, Virginia and rural transit also got creative to provide patients with transit options after the health care organization built an expansion hospital near the town of Waynesboro. Many residents of Waynesboro started using the new facility, but ran into trouble when they were referred to the base hospital in Staunton but had no way to get there. Augusta Health partnered with rural transit to establish a shuttle bus system between hospitals and the towns the facilities serve. For the past seven years, the health care firm has contributed \$60,000 per year to help keep the two-bus service running. The service operates 12 hours a day, and carries 3,600 riders a month. Success stories like KART, Blue Ridge Community College, and Augusta Health show that rural transit operators and businesses can be great partners, serving community needs through positive working relationships and a little creativity.

7) Work it, don't just watch it. If you are going to serve business interests, it helps to think like them. The hard work starts after the deal is made, so give it time to work, ride the service, and ask questions of the riders. See if there are adjustments to make that would improve the service.

8) Measure and record program impact. Successful businesses constantly monitor their performance, so transit systems can be a good partner by doing the same. Keep track of operational costs, ridership, rider satisfaction, and community impact, and communicate frequently with the partnering business.

9) Package your new program's success (but keep yourself out of the limelight). Use the data you gather about your service's success to develop a marketing campaign. Use social media, write press releases and create advertising for the system, and make your business partners the heroes in it all. Business will support any success stories

they are involved with, and the more you try to stay out of the limelight, the more you will be in it.

10) Celebrate & fuel the buzz. Celebrate success and distribute case studies and information sheets about it to regional chambers of commerce and local economic development departments. The more you put the word out about the successful transit service your business partners have contributed to, the more support you will receive from the business community.

For more information

National RTAP has assembled several resources to assist rural transit managers with making their business-relationship development plans, including technical briefings, presentations, and webinars. Visit the link at the Source below and search for "Make Business Part of Rural Transit's Business" in the site's Search bar.

Source

- Make Business Part of Rural Transit's Business. Webinar, technical brief, and Powerpoint presentation. <http://www.nationalrtap.org>.