

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the literature review, the responses to the questionnaire, and the case studies, there are four key results of this synthesis.

First, the most effective way to communicate with riders is identified in a limited way in the existing practices. Differentiating among the types of communications and riders, and the point at which the communication occurs in the travel chain is the key to identifying which communication methods are most effective. Each type of communication lends itself to specific dissemination characteristics such as frequency, dissemination media, and accessibility.

For example, general information, such as maps, schedules, and fare information, is normally provided on a periodic basis, particularly when something changes. This type of information does not need to be provided in real time. The most effective media used to disseminate this type of information is hard copy, the Internet, and the telephone. Using dynamic message signs (DMSs) at stops and stations is not an effective means of disseminating this type of information. In addition, this information is normally provided in large print, as well as on a Section 508-compliant website and in Braille. Audible and visual announcements are not an effective way of communicating this information.

The demographics associated with riders (and potential riders) are also critical factors in determining the most effective method of communication. For example, in the FTA study (*Customer Preferences for Transit ATIS*), many individuals desired the most basic information at bus stops—a clock, rather than DMSs. In Ventura County, California, and Portland, Oregon, where the majority of households and residents have access to the Internet and/or own a wireless device, communications methods focus on electronic techniques. These techniques will not be as effective in areas where the population is not as “wired.”

Other rider characteristics also factor into determining the most effective method of communicating. For example, “choice” riders (those who have other means of traveling) may require specific dissemination media, such as wireless application protocol (WAP)-enabled mobile devices or DMSs. In recent studies regarding newer transit services, such as bus rapid transit, it is thought that the “high-tech” nature of this service will attract and maintain ridership.

Where the communication occurs in the travel chain is also important. “The full extent of a journey from the passenger’s viewpoint is being more and more clearly recognized: a journey is an integrated whole that contains several stages that can be understood as a travel chain.” The different stages can make a positive or negative contribution to the ease of travel depending on whether or not the component factors have been integrated into a system. The user of public transportation needs information at all stages of the journey. Traveling from home to one’s destination with public transport requires many kinds of information. This is especially true if that particular journey is being undertaken for the first time or if the passenger has functional or mobility disabilities.

Second, one overall term was used by survey respondents and case study interviewees to describe communications effectiveness—consistency. Transportation agencies and the literature confirmed that the consistency of the communication was perhaps the most important factor in providing effective communications. There are two types of consistency: consistency among the sources of information within an agency and consistency of the information provided to the customer. In larger agencies, several departments are often responsible for disseminating different types of information. If this information is not generated by one system, department, or staff member, it may not be consistent throughout the agency. First, if the information is provided electronically and is not always accurate, this inconsistency will lessen the effectiveness of the communication. For example, if a DMS displays, in countdown format, the time of the arrival of the next vehicle, and it is not always correct, this inconsistency will change the perception of transit by those customers using the signs. In addition, they may simply stop referring to the DMSs as a way to know when the next vehicle is coming. Second, if a rider contacts customer service, and customer service does not have the same information that dispatch or other sources has, this rider may be told something that is not timely and is therefore not consistent with the actual situation. Furthermore, with the proliferation of information service providers, a rider can now receive the same information from multiple sources.

Third, simplifying information often makes it more effective. For example, several agencies are moving away from traditional timetables, because they can be difficult to read and interpret. Several agencies, most notably Transport for

London and TransLink in Singapore, use timetables that are either bus stop or route schedules that show approximately how often a bus will arrive at a stop or along a route, rather than providing specific times. These new types of timetables have proven to be quite effective. Another example of simplifying information is accessing information on vehicles arriving and departing at a particular stop. For example, Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon (TriMet) allows customers to enter a “Stop ID” on the website to obtain real-time information.

However, the balance between simplifying information and customizing it for an individual is difficult to achieve. This critical balance is based on the range of customers’ needs and of their information requirements, and other rider characteristics such as new versus existing riders, and local riders who are familiar with the area versus visitors.

Fourth, the biggest challenges associated with rider communications can be summarized as follows:

- Reaching the specific individuals for which the communication was intended.
- Getting people to attend to communications, even when provided in multiple formats on various dissemination media.
- Inadequate funding.
- Public perception that transportation agencies should not be expending funds on communications campaigns.
- Need for multiple media and multiple languages for communications dissemination.
- Timeliness of information to all passengers.
- Developing e-communications that are not considered spam.
- For new riders, giving them the confidence, in addition to the information, for their first trip.
- Acquiring and maintaining qualified staff in the call center.
- Information overload, which results in riders not paying attention to communications such as rider alerts.
- Identifying potential riders and the associated communication costs.
- Reaching a wide audience in an affordable and effective way.
- Service changes that require the updating of multiple site-specific static signs.
- Enlisting riders for e-mail alerts so that agencies can discontinue “seat drop” notices.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the synthesis. First, agencies report needing to take the following into account when determining the most effective method of communicating with riders:

- The stage of the travel chain in which the communication is needed,
- The content of the communication,

- The demographic characteristics of the communications recipients and their ownership of and ability to use technology,
- The capabilities of specific technology that could be used to generate the communications,
- The requirements for making the communication accessible, and
- Whether or not the communication will be provided to an information service provider for additional dissemination.

Second, if technology is used to communicate with riders, agencies reported needing to establish a process for testing and monitoring the accuracy and timeliness of the communications. Several agencies indicated in their questionnaire responses that they did not test their communications to determine effectiveness, nor did they monitor the communications once they were disseminated by means of electronic media. Even though additional resources are necessary to do the testing and monitoring, it has been determined that the communication should meet the following criteria for effectiveness:

- Reach the market for which it was intended,
- Be accessible to all individuals,
- Be understood by the individuals receiving it,
- Be received in a timely way, and
- Result in the changes that were expected as a result of the communication.

Third, agencies reported the need to select appropriate dissemination media based on not only the content of the communication, but also the demographics of riders. Furthermore, many agencies have determined that as long as they provide the communication through a variety of media, riders will determine how best to access the communication and what to do with the information. This was mentioned by several respondents, most notably Ann Arbor Transportation Authority and TriMet.

Fourth, agencies reported that having an “information strategy” is critical to ensuring effective communications. An example of this strategy was developed by Metro in Leeds, United Kingdom (see chapter two). This strategy, which is updated on an annual basis, focuses on fulfilling the needs of Metro’s customers by developing an approach to address each of the following:

- Customer opinions regarding current communications based partially on market research,
- Data sources,
- Data management,
- Information delivery mechanisms,
- Customer relationship management and outreach,
- Performance standards and monitoring, and
- Identifying necessary resources to carry out the strategy.

Under the information delivery section of the strategy, Metro identifies requirements for each stage of the trip as

mentioned earlier as an element of the HELLI program. In the 2006 Information Strategy, Metro identified what is currently being offered to customers and what should be improved in the following journey stages or locations:

- Pre-journey,
- Beginning of the journey,
- Bus stop/shelter/station, and
- Bus journey.

Although the launch of the “yournextbus” service could be considered typical from a pure marketing perspective, it required significant involvement from several parts of the agency (it was not just a marketing project) and followed their information strategy. This successful communication project highlights the needs for such a strategy and for cooperation among various parts of an agency.

Fifth, agencies reported needing to ensure that internal processes and resources are in place for delivering a consistent quality of information. In terms of processes, these must include maintaining current and accurate information, which is often more challenging than delivering the information. Also, it may be necessary to explore innovative financing to cover some of the resources necessary for effective communications. For example, to promote Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) services to residents of Santa Clara County, VTA worked through local businesses to develop customized web pages for their organizations on VTA’s website (<http://www.vta.org>). The custom web pages include information on VTA bus and light rail serving the employment site.

Finally, agencies reported that maintaining or increasing ridership is not the only metric that determines the effectiveness of communications. Although most communications will either directly or indirectly affect ridership, specific types of communication are not necessarily going to elicit a change in ridership, such as security announcements that remind passengers to be aware of unattended packages, etc. Also, there is a different length of time associated with each type of communication in which effectiveness can be measured. If an agency develops an information or communication strategy, different approaches to measure effectiveness should be identified for each type of communication.

Based on the survey results, there are five areas where further work could be done to better determine the effectiveness of communication, particularly by means of electronic media.

- Methods of effectiveness will vary with the type of communication; therefore, using a list of the types

of communication that are provided by electronic means and then determining specific measures of effectiveness could assist agencies in measuring effectiveness. In this synthesis, overall measures were identified (e.g., increase in ridership); however, there was a wide range in the types of communications considered.

- A “model” that could be used by agencies to determine the most effective dissemination media might be helpful. This model should take into account the demographics of the region within which the transit service is being provided, in addition to such factors as the demographics of the riders and whether the agency wants to attract new riders and/or maintain existing ridership.
- Much more information is required about the capital, and operations and maintenance costs associated with communications that will be disseminated by electronic means. Now that more agencies throughout the world are deploying these systems, research into these costs conducted over the next several years should yield more data than what is currently available. Furthermore, a study could be done concerning the requirements of partnering with information service and/or telecommunications providers. Although most of the responding agencies indicated that they did not have a relationship with any of these types of companies, that may change over the next several years as the use of WAP and short message services becomes more prevalent in the United States. Also, a review of the transit systems that have had success in using a third party (i.e., commercial venture) to provide their customer information could contribute to the understanding not only of costs, but also alternatives to providing customer information.
- More information regarding the communication of safety and security information could be provided to agencies. Although it was expected that agencies would describe how best to communicate this type of information as part of this synthesis, it was not mentioned in the open-ended survey responses. Because this is an emphasis area at the federal level, guidance regarding the most effective methods to communicate safety and security information would be helpful.
- More in-depth information regarding a communications project from concept to deployment might be made available to agencies. This could be in the form of a guidance document that provides examples of how specific agencies have made their communications programs successful with technology. Examples could come from both the United States and abroad.