

Imperative #7

Make Business Part of Rural Transit's Business

How to Form Strategic Business Partnerships



When we think of stakeholders, we typically think of riders, our Board members, elected officials, the media or perhaps even other transportation organizations in the community. One of the most ignored stakeholder groups is businesses—employers and business organizations that are the lifeblood of every community. In some communities, we transport workers. In other communities, we help people reach continuing education opportunities to build their employment skills. And, for some enlightened communities, we are part of the economic development story that attracts new business and industry. Simply put, rural transit already serves business. We just need to do a better job of sharing that story.

This technical brief is the fifth of a five-part National RTAP Webinar series. Part One of the series set forth the major trends shaping an exciting future for rural transit across America and laid out specific action steps—10 Imperatives—for rural transit operators and the entire rural transit industry. This technical brief explores Imperative #7—making business part of rural transit's business. This brief provides guidance on how rural transit operators can develop workforce arguments to recruit and engage businesses and form strategic partnerships with businesses and business organizations.

Making Business Part of Rural Transit's Business—One of the Keys to Customer-Centricity

The central theme of National RTAP's five-part Webinar series is focused on how the rural transit industry can continue to thrive in the future by becoming more customer-centric—*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 new mindset requires a new way of thinking about strategic partnerships. It involves moving beyond just serving the community to becoming part of the community. This includes showcasing how a rural transit system impacts the entire community's overall quality of life—including the business community.

The old way focused on reporting outputs to a myriad of stakeholder interests including Board members, riders' councils, elected officials and others. The new way goes one step further and includes an often overlooked stakeholder group—the businesses community, comprised of both



individual firms and business organizations such as Chambers of Commerce and Economic Development Partnerships.

Top Five Reasons Why Rural Transit Is Important to Business

There are five major reasons why rural transit is important to business today:

1. In most rural areas, the workforce is spread out over great distances. Rural transit operators provide a direct **link to workers**.
2. Rural transit can help business do more with less. Businesses do not want to operate their own “jobs bus.” The capital and operating costs are something they just don’t want to manage. They turn to experienced rural transit operators **to provide this service more efficiently and cost-effectively than they could**.
3. **Businesses want to contribute to the overall local economy**. Recognizing that many residents in rural areas do not have access to cars, supporting a rural transportation program is aligned with supporting one’s local economy. The greater the number of people who have access and mobility, the greater the circulation of money and economic activity.
4. **Businesses want to contribute to the overall quality of life of all residents in their community**. Again, recognizing that many residents in rural areas do not have access to cars, business leaders in particular want people to enjoy a high quality of life. This, in turn, contributes to a vibrant community. Community transit often plays this important role.
5. Lastly, community or rural transit often **provides a vital link to other neighboring tribes and communities**. Business leaders appreciate this linkage “to the outside world” more than most.

Ten-Step Guide to Help Make Rural Transit the Business of Business

Outlined below is a ten-step guide to get business leaders to come to you asking, “*How can you help my business?*” Included are tips on forming strategic partnerships with Chambers of Commerce and economic development programs to help identify even more opportunities.

Step 1: Put on Your Best Suit

Well, not literally. But figuratively speaking, think about the journey you are about to make—to join forces with business leaders—to make business deals. And, think about the way business typically views governmental entities—slow and bureaucratic.

The best way to prepare is to package your existing service. What you currently do, whom you do it for and how you operate. Create a briefing notebook of sorts that puts the very best light on your organization. The notebook will become a core part of your pitch and will be a confidence-building tool for both you and your audiences from day one.

A helpful tip here—“*The road is the way. Get on it.*” Once you start to assemble the story of your operation, you will be surprised at just how much information you already have. Just organize it in a

logical manner. When you show the book to someone outside of your organization and they say “wow,” you know you have what you need or what you can quickly customize when the first opportunity arises.

Step 2: First Stop — Visit the Recommenders

With your notebook story in hand, the first stop on your journey to making business a bigger part of rural transit is at the local Chamber and economic development office. These two organizations are tied to every major business in your service area. Your message—“We are here to help.”

Once you plant the seed, you will be amazed at how these officials can spread the word to their members that you may hold the answer to their constituents’ transportation needs. Once the relationship gets off to a good start, ask them if you can present at one of the board or member meetings or if you can be profiled in their newsletters. If you’re really connecting with them, ask to do a joint mailing to their members or a subgroup of the largest businesses we would classify as your likely prospects.

Step 3: Second Stop—Likely Prospects

Whatever outcome happens with your Chamber and economic development office partnerships, don’t just sit back and wait for likely prospects to call you. Make your own luck.

Look at your local newspaper and see what companies are doing well, what companies are hiring and what companies are probably drawing workers from miles away. Then go see them. The best place to start is at the top. Call the CEO and ask for a few minutes to introduce yourself and your potential service. During your visit, take the two most important tools you have available—your ears! Ask the CEO, when it comes to her/his workforce, what are the greatest challenges facing the company. The answer may just open opportunities on which you can deliver.

Case Study #1: Kings Area Rural Transit

Challenge: Limited transportation options for residents and workers in the San Joaquin Valley, located in Southern California, needing to travel to work sites such as farms, correctional facilities and employers located in rural communities throughout the region. Additionally, farm workers were travelling in unsafe and unreliable conditions. New services would have to meet long-distance commute patterns and off-peak shift hours.

Solution: KART started a vanpool program to meet the transportation needs in the region. These vanpools effectively address the challenges of limited public transit options for work trips, varied work sites and nontraditional work shifts. Additionally, farm workers have safe, reliable transportation operated by qualified drivers. Currently, more than 350 vanpools operate in eight counties. Businesses including casinos and ski resorts throughout the state are turning to KART for advice as well.

Step 4: Keep an Open Mind

Speaking of luck, a new study just came out that supports the idea that people do, in fact, make their own luck. Psychologist Richard Wiseman found that you can learn to be a luckier person just by changing how you look at the world around you. Wiseman studied the lives of 400 people over the course of 10

years. His conclusion is that while some people are prone to worse luck than others, you can create your own good fortune by adjusting your perspective. According to Wiseman, unlucky people are typically more anxious and tend to be more hyper-focused on the specifics of a situation. Lucky people, on the other hand, are less anxious and open to whatever opportunities present themselves.

So when you hear the CEO's challenges, don't fret if transportation isn't mentioned right off. Sometimes you have to probe. Ask her/him what is their turnover/retention rate? What does it cost to replace one worker? How long does it take to find and train the right worker? And, moreover, why do people leave? Could transportation be an underlying factor?

Step 5: Be Creative

The solution that meets a challenge or opportunity doesn't always come in a nice and neat package. Here are a few innovative examples from Virginia.

Case Study #2: Blue Ridge Community College

Challenge: Blue Ridge Community College needed to help students and faculty get to their rural campus located between two small towns of Harrisonburg and Staunton, Virginia. The college went to the local rural transit company and asked for a special service but had little money to offer.



Solution: The rural transit operator could use federal and state dollars to fund 68 percent of the new service *if* it was a "public bus service"—open to anyone who wanted to ride on it. The new service would, however, have a majority of its stops on the community college campus and the most populated areas of the two feeder towns. One of the stops in each feeder town was planned as a transfer station where they tied into the towns' local bus systems. Today, two buses run 15 hours a day carrying 4,000 people a month to and from the Blue Ridge Community College!

Case Study #3: Augusta Health

Challenge: Augusta Health, located in Staunton, Virginia built a new, smaller expansion hospital near Waynesboro, Virginia. The problem presented itself when local residents of Waynesboro who were referred from the home base hospital couldn't make their appointments.



Solution: To make this work, Augusta Health contributes \$60,000 per year to help subsidize this community lifeline—the shuttle system between the hospital facilities and the feeder towns. Two buses travel 12 hours a day. Transfer centers work at three points on the route. Today, 3,600 riders a month use this service now in its seventh year of operation.

Step 6: Crawl, Walk, Run

Once a solution is formulated, it doesn't have to be grandiose. You can work towards the optimal solution by starting small—perhaps one vehicle. In other words—“*crawl, walk, run.*” This approach will also enable you to experiment when it comes to estimating capital and operating cost. The smaller the investment and “*at risk*” operational money, the more you should be willing to try a creative arrangement.

Step 7: Work It, Don't Just Watch It

One of the most common mistakes that happen with new deals is that everyone thinks the hard work is over when the agreement is signed. That's like saying the hard work is over when the honeymoon ends. It's quite the opposite. The hard work starts after the deal—when the service is launched.

Give it some time to work, but also give it some time and attention to make it work. Ride the service yourself, and ask people what they think. How did they hear about it? Why aren't others using it? Could they recruit others? Get smart and use the information and insights to continuously improve the product.

Step 8: Measure and Record Program Impact

For any new service that is based on a business relationship, it is critical that you record everything—operational costs, ridership, rider satisfaction and community impact. All of this information should be packaged into annual reports that you present to your partner(s) to constantly “take their temperature” on how it's going. You are dealing with business, so you must mean business. The bonus here is that you can use some of the information and insights you gather in the next step - Step 9: Packaging the New Program's Success.

A helpful tip here—National RTAP's last Webinar entitled “*Measure & Report Your Impacts*” (look for the tape measure on the report cover) offers a great step-by-step guide to assessing and recording community impact. This Webinar can be accessed from National RTAP's homepage—www.nationalrtap.org.

Step 9: Package Your New Program's Success (But Keep You Out of the Limelight)

In every case, however, point to the innovative business leaders and their business as the heroes. Make them look smart and they'll turn into your biggest apostles. In order to make them look good, you must package what you did together in an easy to share format comprising short stories or “sound bites.” Keep in mind, your business partner will not be leading this effort. They want to stick to their own knitting. This understood, they will support your efforts to package any success story that they can be associated with in their community.

So how do you package the story? Turn to your Gen Ys at your agency. Give them this assignment. Ask them to make a video for “YouTube.” Just filming the business leader describing what service is provided and how it is helping their company and the overall community is all you need. Part of our Web 2.0

culture today is to share everything. Creating short digital stories is the way to facilitate this innate urge—“*pass this along.*” Create one page factsheets or case studies in postcard format, too.

Another tip—the more you try to keep yourself and your organization out of the limelight, the more you will be in it. That’s one of the rules of what is called the cosmic highway.

Step 10: Celebrate and Fuel the Buzz—Community Transit Delivers Bottom Line Benefits

Don’t wait for others to tell your story. Toot your own horn. Make sure your electronic case studies get into the hands of your stakeholders. Mail them out yourself. Ask your friends to circulate them too. Get these materials to the Chamber and the economic development folks, the media and other stakeholders to remind them of your service, your system’s creativity and the overall impact your business partners are making on the community.

Wrap Up

Share this technical brief with everyone in your agency, and together make rural transit part of the fabric of your community—***improving your customers’ mobility, making your customers’, including business organizations, lives better!***

About John W. Martin

John W. Martin is president and CEO of the Southeastern Institute of Research, Inc. (SIR) (www.sirresearch.com), a 45-year-old marketing research firm headquartered in Richmond, Virginia. SIR has conducted over 13,000 studies for *Fortune 1000* companies, governmental agencies and non-profit organizations. Through in-depth interviews, focus groups, ethnography and survey research, SIR helps organizations identify their unique selling propositions, formulate communication strategies, explore new products and services, and measure the overall effectiveness of marketing programs.

In addition to heading up SIR, John is the co-founder and CEO of The Boomer Project (www.boomerproject.com), a national research-based marketing “think tank” that tracks generational trends and provides strategic consultation on how to effectively communicate with each generation—Gen Ys, Gen X, Baby Boomers and Silent Generation. Boomer Project insights have been featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Toronto Star*, *BusinessWeek*, *Barron’s*, *NBC Nightly News*, *CBS News*, *MSNBC* and *NPR’s Morning Edition*. John co-authored the award-winning business book, *Boomer Consumer: Ten New Rules for Marketing to America’s Largest, Wealthiest and Most Influential Group*, published in 2007 and subsequently named a Top 10 Business Book by Corbis, a Bill Gates Company.

The content in this paper and National RTAP’s related Webinar series are not official National RTAP policy, but rather reflect the views of Mr. Martin, informed by hundreds of marketing studies his firm has conducted for transit and transportation agencies.