

Marketing and Branding for Bus Rapid Transit

Overview

More and more transit agencies are using more sophisticated, contemporary commercial marketing approaches and methods to both attract new users and to retain existing riders. Some of the methods include sophisticated market research and segmentation tactics, branding and identity programs, product positions, and individualized and targeted marketing. The use of these approaches has primarily involved newer express and rapid bus services in cities across Canada and the US. From unique branding that visually distinguishes the buses, stops and stations from the “regular” transit services provided by the parent agency, to targeted marketing strategies designed to position the services as “premium” transportation options, the new approaches collectively help create a positive brand awareness amongst the general public and have attracted new riders to the services.

Selected Resources

There are numerous studies and reports on the use of contemporary marketing tools and methods for transit services.

The Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) prepared a brief study on transit marketing at <http://www.transitaction.ca/issuepapers/IP14.pdf>.

The US Transportation Research Board library has several relevant conference proceedings and reports available through their website at: <http://www.trb.org/>.

References are found at the end of this issue paper.

Context

Like any product in a competitive marketplace, public transit competes against other transportation options from which it must distinguish itself to help win customers, or in this case, riders. While many transit providers have historically used basic marketing methods (e.g. rider surveys, general advertising, etc.), more and more agencies are using more sophisticated marketing methods and approaches to attract, cultivate and retain transit

users, particularly on newer express and rapid bus services. Often, these approaches are also part of a part of a larger transportation demand management strategy.

Here in Canada, many of the newer so-called bus rapid transit (BRT) services – like Halifax’s MetroLink, Waterloo’s iXpress, York Region’s Viva, and Metro Vancouver’s B-line service – have incorporated a comprehensive marketing and branding component into their design, roll-out and ongoing operations. Collectively, these new approaches are used to both distinguish the services from regular transit services from the parent agency (where the brand awareness may not be so positive amongst non-riders), and to position the service as a specialty or premium service with a positive brand awareness to help attract new riders to it.

The application of commercial marketing and branding approaches to such systems has typically involved such features as:

- more detailed market research to better segment and understand different user groups and their expectations for transit;
- targeted marketing, service development, direct outreach and advertising designed to meet and reach specific market segments (e.g. business riders versus student riders); and,
- service branding activities to create a consistent, modern and attractive identity for the vehicles themselves, their stops, advertising, and promotional materials to help distinguish the service both from the parent transit agency, and as more convenient, comfortable and faster than the private automobile.

Policy context

Collectively, the individual marketing and promotions plans for the new transit services are generally directly linked to, or supported by, larger policy documents. These policy documents include regional transportation plans and strategies, long-term development plans and growth strategies. The programs profiled in this issue paper also developed separate service marketing plans for their services, some of which are updated annually.

- **B-line (Metro Vancouver):** One of the first rapid bus services in the country, Metro Vancouver's B-Line service now includes three lines covering approximately 50-kilometres. The system carries 60,000 passengers a day, or 10% of all daily bus ridership in the region. The B-Line service is supported by both municipal and regional transportation plans, including TransLink's new 30-year transportation strategy, *Transport 2040*, and the new *2009 10-Year Plan*. The UTSP website at www.tc.gc.ca/Programs/Environment/utsp/menu.htm includes a case study on the B-line service, *Intelligent Transportation Systems in 98 B-Line Rapid Bus Service*.
- **Viva (York Region):** The Viva BRT project is an innovative public-private service that evolved from the *York Rapid Transit Plan*. The project is a critical component of the municipality's strategic planning document, *Vision 2026*, which was developed in 2001 to highlight eight goals for the region. One of these goals is to enhance the region through the promotion of alternative transportation methods. As a part of the amalgamation of transit services in York Region, a two-year (2002-2003) *Marketing and Communications Plan* was developed to develop and introduce the new Viva brand. Since that time, YRT has retained marketing consultants to assist with ongoing Viva service marketing.
- **iXpress (Waterloo Region):** The iXpress is Grand River Transit's rapid bus service.

Its 33-kilometre route connects the four downtowns, major university facilities, as well as office complexes, major hospitals and regional shopping centres. Waterloo's iXpress service is linked to the region's long-range transportation plan, *Moving Forward 2031*, and the region's Regional Growth Management Strategy that was adopted in 2003. The project was funded partially through Transport Canada's Urban Transportation Showcase Program and included a marketing plan component. For more information on the iXpress project, please visit the UTSP website at www.tc.gc.ca/programs/environment/UTSP/showcases.htm.



MetroLink advertising and logo

- **MetroLink (Halifax Regional Municipality):** MetroLink provides three limited stop, direct service routes to downtown Halifax and Dartmouth from two major commuter areas. Launched in 2005, the service operates in shared traffic and dedicated busways on 37 kilometres of roadways. The MetroLink service includes distinctively branded buses, terminals, stations/stops, and public information. The service and its planned extensions are clearly linked to and supported by the region's 2006 *Regional Plan*. The project was funded partially through Transport Canada's Urban Transportation Showcase Program, including a marketing plan component. For more information on the MetroLink project, please visit the UTSP website at www.tc.gc.ca/programs/environment/UTSP/showcases.htm.

Rationale and objectives

Traditionally, public transit has not been researched, marketed, or “sold” as a consumer product. Service schedules, routing and services were developed ‘in house’ and based on basic market research that typically did not identify or disaggregate different user groups and their specific transit needs, expectations and desires. While marketing efforts did occur, historically, the programs focused on commute trips and employers or broad-based awareness campaigns.



A Viva bus stop at York University

More recently, the concepts of commercial, social and individualized marketing are being applied to the design and delivery of transit services, particularly for newer, bus rapid transit initiatives. By utilizing more sophisticated market research and marketing approaches, transit providers are not only able to identify discrete service needs (e.g. the transit needs of non-commercial business district transit commuters), they are also able to help meet the expectations of potential transit users for new or expanded transit services.

As a component of the services profiled in this issue paper, transit providers are also incorporating service branding and positioning tactics to shape social and individual perceptions of the rapid bus services and to help remove common biases many non-rider groups have about transit.

By incorporating branding and identity programs for the services, service operators create a unified system image and identity that clearly “brands” the system. Distinctive logos, color combinations, and graphics are often applied to BRT vehicles, stations, stops, signage, promotional materials and advertising, and any additional service features (e.g. a web site). It also often includes creating a more ‘emotive’ or ‘aspirational’ name for the service – B-Line, MetroLink, Viva, iXpress – that both speaks to the service’s desirable attributes, but also helps sets it apart from regular, parent agency transit services which do not include such passenger amenities or travel features.

Positioning is used as a component of branding to shape user and potential user perceptions of the systems as a unique and higher level public transit service. Marketing typically emphasizes the unique features of the system, such as its speed (vs. both regular transit and private automobile), reliability, service frequency and comfort. Some of the systems, like MetroLink and Viva, use long-distance commuter style buses with more comfortable seating, passenger lighting and other on-board amenities.

Actions

The use of branding and marketing tools and approaches in four featured services are summarized below.

- **Viva:** Viva is the York Region’s bus rapid transit project. The unique, public-private transit partnership operates six routes along more than 80 kilometres of existing roadways, and links four emerging urban centres. Prior to developing the system, a private consulting firm was hired to develop a brand and marketing communications strategy for the new system. The plan resulted in a detailed market strategy that identified three key user groups for the system – existing frequent transit users, occasional or infrequent users and non-transit users, the most critical group for the project to attract to be successful. The

consultants also went through a detailed consumer testing process to select the name of the service that included focus groups and telephone surveys with target markets. Viva was marketed using the slogan “uniquely great transit” to emphasize its features and benefits. An interactive website, electronic newsletter, and e-mail broadcasts were all used to encourage ridership. An outreach program involving prominent community members calling themselves “Viva Ambassadors,” and a group of high school and college students, called “Team Viva,” raised community awareness at public venues and special events. The Viva name itself was selected after

- **iXpress:** The iXpress service included a marketing and outreach program to raise awareness of the new transit option and encourage its use. It included an umbrella, multi-media marketing campaign to raise the profile of a distinct iXpress brand and to ensure maximum public awareness of the new service. It also included a community-based social marketing campaign that emphasized direct, personal contact with community members through focus groups with target user groups who helped identify the specific barriers that would need to be addressed for them to use the service. Additional consumer attitude surveys were conducted with the general public.



An iXpress bus arrives at a stop

- **MetroLink:** The MetroLink service launch included a comprehensive public awareness and marketing campaign that included direct mail flyers to 30,000 households in the area of the terminals, transit pass retail

outlet counter cards and maps, and radio, television and newspaper ads. Using the slogan, “A whole new way to travel,” a number of unique promotional materials were also distributed, including reusable coffee mugs. The marketing campaign won a Gemstone Award from the Canadian Public Relations Society. In order to promote MetroLink as a premium service and to entice potential new transit users, special attention was paid to the bus design and layout. An award-winning, modern exterior design provided instant recognition of MetroLink as an upgraded service. The buses, terminals and smaller stations are all branded with the service’s distinctive logo.

- **B-Line (Metro Vancouver):** One of the first rapid bus services in the country, Metro Vancouver’s B-line includes distinctively branded, articulated buses and station designs with real-time bus arrival information on three routes in Greater Vancouver. Development of each of the three was preceded by a market research program, and a coordinated marketing and education campaign to introduce the service. Print, radio, TV and web media were used to promote the service and targeted outreach with specific, larger user groups (e.g. students, seniors, etc.) was carried out. The 99 B-line service, which provides service to the University of British Columbia (Greater Vancouver’s single largest transit destination), has included more student-oriented, direct outreach and engagement activities on campus and using TransLink’s popular Next Bus information tool. While not for the B-line service alone Next Bus is an SMS messaging system that gives users a quick and easy way to find out the next six buses scheduled to arrive at a given stop. Next Bus is one of a number of tools TransLink is introducing to provide service to customers in “non-traditional” ways. Earlier in 2008, TransLink also launched Next Bus on Facebook, a variation which allows a Facebook member to have schedule information about

“favourite” stops – home, school, office, etc. – delivered to his or her desktop or wireless device.

In addition to these examples, there are numerous examples of more innovative bus rapid transit marketing and branding programs in Canada, including Mississauga’s upcoming bus rapid transit project and Guelph Transit’s recent rebranding initiative. There are also other programs that have incorporated more sophisticated, contemporary marketing approaches. Two notable projects highlighted in other UTSP case studies include:

- **TransLink – TravelSmart:** A personalized marketing program that included home and business visits to individuals and families to help them fully understand their personal options. Participants were offered incentives to travel more sustainably, including personalized transportation plans.
- **Équiterre – Transportation Cocktail Campaign:** A targeted public information and education campaign designed to enhance peoples understanding of different travel choices, and the positive or negative effects of their decisions.

Results

Some of the results of the marketing initiatives undertaken through the MetroLink, Viva, B-line and iXpress projects are highlighted below.

- **MetroLink:** The launch of MetroLink was met with unprecedented ridership growth in comparison to any previous new Metro Transit service. Since introducing the service, overall transit ridership has increased over 20 percent with close to 90 percent of the increase directly attributable to MetroLink. A 2005 survey showed that during the most intensive period of service marketing – between service launch and one-year after service launch – ridership increased 49 percent. The success of MetroLink’s marketing strategy itself was

confirmed through on-board intercept surveys conducted during the first service year that revealed that a 36 percent of riders had found out about the service and decided to try it via newspaper, radio or TV ads and stories. Later on-board rider surveys showed that over 20 percent of riders were new transit users.



A Viva bus

- **Viva:** In 2005, a market research summary found very high brand recognition of the service, including 83 percent of non-riders. A follow-up 2007 study found that 100 percent of non-riders interviewed were aware of the Viva service. Overall transit use has increased by 35 percent along rapid transit corridors since the program’s inception.
- **B-line:** A 2003 Bus Rapid Transit Evaluation Study conducted by Transport Canada indicated that approximately 23 percent of the users of the first B-line service, the 98 B-Line, were former car drivers or car passengers who changed mode to ride transit. Part of the systems success was directly attributable to the service’s design and positioning as an ‘upper tier’ transportation service. Product branding, including shelter design, service logos, bus colour schemes and on-board and bus stop amenities (e.g. real time travel information) helped further distinguish the service and build brand identity.
- **iXpress:** The launch of the iXpress service included a significant marketing campaign

that involved the distribution of new timetables, newsletters, and print and radio ads. A separate iXpress web page on the Grand River Transit website was also launched. All iXpress sign posts, roadside stations and buses were branded with an eye-catching logo and colour scheme. To date, two on-board intercept surveys have been conducted, reaching 1,500 riders. Survey questions included questions on age, gender, trip purpose, trip origin, trip destination, trip frequency, and mode used prior to iXpress. Survey results indicated that 15 percent of passengers had a car available for the trip but chose to use the iXpress service. Interestingly, survey results also indicated that the majority of trips are neither work-related (which accounted for 20 percent of riders), nor school-related (which accounted for 26 percent of trips).

Challenges

Some of the key challenges that may be faced in the development and implementation of marketing and branding strategies include:

- **Organizational culture:** Many transit operators are used to judging performance in terms of safety, reliability, and financial return. Moving beyond an operations-centric view to include less familiar marketing criteria and performance measures, including brand recognition and customer interface, may take some transit operators more time or require the assistance of a professional marketing firm.
- **Cost and capacity:** A professional market research program and marketing strategy can be expensive to develop and be beyond the capacity of in-house communications and/or marketing staff. The cost of designing and constructing any 'branded' bus stations and shelters can also add additional expense, as can the addition of passenger amenities and features such as real time "next bus departure" information signs at bus stops, system-specific transit

priority measures such as queue-jump lanes, and web-based trip planning systems for passengers to develop an optimized itinerary.



A branded B-line stop in Downtown Vancouver

Best Practices

Based on a survey of the bus rapid transit services explored in this issue paper and a review of other research and literature, some general guidelines and best practices in carrying out marketing and branding program include:

- **Create a separate brand identity.** It is important to clearly delineate the service as a signature offering that is different from the parent transit agency. This is to help establish or brand the service as a premium transit offering and has been shown to help attract non-transit users. A distinctive name, logo and colour scheme or graphics should be applied to vehicles and used at stations and on printed materials.
- **Focus on the positive and unique features of the service.** Marketing should emphasize the unique features of the service such as speed, reliability, service frequency and span, and comfort. Common

features that are marketed on many US bus rapid transit (BRT) systems include:

- BRT is faster or more efficient than traditional bus service or private automobile;
 - BRT is more convenient;
 - BRT is less expensive and easier than driving and parking;
 - BRT can alleviate traffic congestion;
 - BRT is an economic alternative to automobile ownership; and,
 - BRT better protects the natural environment from automobile pollution.
- **Know your market.** Market research is a critical component of any successful initiative. Like any successful marketing program, the seller needs to understand who the buyer is. For a transit service, this means understanding who rides (or will ride) the service, why, when and what they value or expect from transit services. Several types of research can be used, including intercept surveys on buses and at transit stops, telephone and web surveys, and focus groups. Increasingly, social networking sites, like Facebook, are being used to carry out market research studies.

Resources

The cost of developing and carrying out marketing and branding strategies varies widely. While some smaller projects can be done in-house or through existing/annual marketing and communications budgets, larger, more complex projects will require more resourcing and, likely, outside help.

For iXpress, the marketing and branding component cost \$500,000 over two years, or five percent of the project's \$9.25 million dollar budget. While full cost figures are not available, the Viva service has spent up to \$300,000 on annual marketing and communications consulting.

Lessons Learned

Based on recent research, the following lessons learned can be applied to new transit marketing and branding initiatives:

- **Transit marketing can be a complex, multi-disciplinary undertaking:** The development of more comprehensive marketing and branding programs involves many procedures among traditionally unrelated fields (e.g. consumer marketing, graphic design and transportation planning). While creating an identity or brand is a collaborative effort that brings together experts from these fields along with stakeholders (riders and potential riders), some tensions or process obstacles may occur. Indeed, the multidisciplinary nature of such an exercise can make an already challenging process more difficult.
- **External marketing consultants can be expensive, but can benefit the project:** Solid market research, targeted marketing, and project branding and identity building is critical to develop and sustain the necessary ridership for larger transit projects like those featured in this issue paper. While many transit agencies maintain in-house communications departments capable of undertaking basic marketing activities, they often lack the capacity and experience to undertake larger, more complex projects. Despite the added expense and management requirements, there can be significant value in bringing in external consultants and marketing experts.

References

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