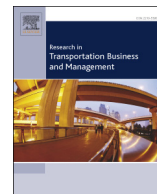




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Research in Transportation Business & Management



Branding and selling public transit in North America: An analysis of recent messages and methods

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 August 2014

Received in revised form 24 September 2015

Accepted 6 January 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Public transit

Advertising

Marketing

Branding

ABSTRACT

Branding, marketing, and advertising play important roles in influencing travel behavior and shaping public opinion about public transit. In recent years, marketing efforts in North America have increasingly featured messages that promote the value of riding public transit. These campaigns underscore a somewhat broader marketing effort that seeks to distinguish public transportation as a better value than commuting by automobile, a position that is bolstered by a weak international economy, fuel price fluctuations, and growing public awareness and concern about environmental issues.

For many public transit managers, marketing falls outside the realm of necessary operations and becomes unimportant relative to other more principal tasks. The unmet need for critical examination of public transportation marketing efforts leaves the efficacy of public transit marketing efforts untested, which is evidenced by both a gap in academic literature that distills best practices but also a gap in professional practice that demonstrates a reluctance to spend scarce resources on marketing. Because of this complex landscape, the long-term value of public transit marketing relative to marketing efforts across other transportation sectors is unclear.

This study examines the proliferation of value-oriented advertising messages, environmental brand designs, and vehicle livery, and specifically the planning and administration of branding efforts. A critical analysis of advertising messages across a select number of North American public transit markets yields a typology that uncovers contemporary advertising practices. We examine best practices and short-term outcomes of advertising in response to situations external to a public transit agency from which transit managers can objectively evaluate future efforts.

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1. Introduction

Corporate-style brands function as constituents of comprehensive marketing programs and are articulated in a variety of ways, but mainly through visual means. For organizations in the transportation sector, brands are commonly expressed through the design of collateral materials, environmental design, and vehicle livery and are reinforced by brand-oriented advertising. This study examines the articulation of public transportation brands across various media through which public transit agencies advertise or market. Our investigation focuses on two key modes of brand communication—advertising and environmental design/vehicle livery. An analysis of the practices in each of these areas is then compared to the overall branding efforts of public transportation providers.

Despite the immediacy and bi-directionality of social media communication as a brand vehicle, our analysis suggests that although public transit agencies are engaging in marketing, branding, and advertising, most agencies lack long-term brand planning and as a result focus on

short-term advertising, which causes agencies to forgo objective evaluation in exchange for near-immediate results. This continual short-term footing creates a haphazard and reactionary mode of branding communication (especially in the social media arena) for public transit agencies (Schweitzer, 2014). Compared to marketing activities across other transportation sectors, our analysis suggests that transit advertising seems to be less consistent, less developed, and with lesser aesthetic quality.

Throughout this article, we refer to marketing as an overarching operational activity that encompasses branding, advertising, and to some extent, public relations. Branding includes the planned and consistent use of a name and the aesthetic manner by which that name is deployed in materials and media. A “brand identity” is commonly conveyed using a logogram (a symbol-based graphic element) or a logotype (a word-based graphic element) or a combination of these, generically referred to as a “logo.” A brand identity typically includes a specific selection of colors used to represent and visually support a logo. Nearly all successful brands are governed by specific rules for use and are guided by plans for deployment which ensures brand consistency and longevity.

Brands in the transportation industry are most commonly articulated through the use of signature colors and logo on the livery—the painted

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decoration—of vehicles. Transportation brands are also found in the built environment across properties, buildings, and facilities used by a particular organization: bus, train, and multi-modal stations; train, bus, and BRT stops; garages; warehouses; hangars; maintenance facilities; administrative facilities; and retail service centers. Brand elements are often featured prominently throughout design in these spaces. Likewise, collateral materials—printed and digital materials through which organizations disseminate important information to customers—often feature brand elements, either as an aesthetic treatment, or the manner in which information is presented, or both. Other environmental design elements include employee uniforms and give-away merchandise (pens, balloons, tote bags). Brands are reinforced by advertising and other marketing activities, and though brand articulation may remain consistent, an advertising “message” can change slightly to address (or “target”) a specific market segment. In nearly every advertisement, brand elements are featured prominently.

Increasingly, social media communications, dialogue and outreach constitutes a significant portion of a public transit brand (Schweitzer, 2014), but is different in substance from other branding elements in that social media is bi-directional making it more difficult to plan or control the brand message. Regardless of mode of communication, maintaining a brand “presence” demands a coordinated investment of capital resources, time, planning, maintenance, and quality control.

1.1. Advertising messages for public transit

There is a long tradition of advertising in the public transit industry (Walb & Booth, 1985). In recent decades, such advertising has focused on increasing ridership, as the relationship between riders, revenues, and greater subsidies has long been established. The goal of most public transit advertising is to persuade *choice riders* (those who own a car but choose to ride public transit for some trips) and not *transit dependent riders* (those who ride transit because they have no other choice). Additional advertising will not necessarily influence the latter group to ride more frequently (Gensch & Torres, 1980; Huey & Everett, 1996).

While public transit agencies have, for more than a hundred years, sold space on their systems to companies wishing to advertise, this is not the focus of the study. Instead, we focus on public transit systems advertising *their own system* in efforts to increase ridership (Schaller, 2004; Silverberg, 1998). Such advertising takes place in one of two environments: (1) external to the transit system, such as billboard advertising, newspaper advertisements, television commercials, radio advertisements; and (2) internal to the system, in the form of collateral materials (printed matter including maps, brochures, schedules, transit cards and tickets), advertisements on interiors and exteriors (bus wraps) of vehicles, at stations and shelters, and within the transit rights-of-way or street rights-of-way.

Data used to investigate public transit agency advertising practices comes from entries for the 2009 AdWheel Awards. AdWheel Awards are presented annually by the American Public Transportation Association for excellence in public transportation marketing, advertising, promotion, and communications. Transportation agencies and consultants to transportation agencies submit materials in four categories: print, electronic media, campaign, and special event. Entries are divided into five groups based on the size and type of the organization. Public transit agencies self-nominate for the competition, and the entries represent the “best of the best” brand activity surrounding public transit. We provide the following synthesis of public transit advertising, organized by thematic topic, evidenced in the AdWheel Award entries.

1.2. Public transit provides a good value, especially when compared to the price of auto fuel

The largest share of advertisements promote cost savings that public transit riders stand to realize by riding transit and not driving. Many of the advertisements feature images of stacks of coins and bundles of

currency or wallets overstuffed with cash. For example, the Butler Transit Authority in Pennsylvania illustrates an advertisement with cash (see Fig. 1) and C-Tran in Vancouver produced a print campaign that emphasized the cost of automobile fuel: “Four Bucks for a Gallon of Gas? GASP!” (see Fig. 2). Similarly, a radio/public service advertisement produced by Jackson Public Transportation featured the phrase, “Got Gas? Didn’t Think So. Spend Less, Save More with Jatron” (O’Keefe & Reid, 1990). Pennsylvania’s Red Rose Transit encourages people to ride public transit for 25¢ per ride during a September promotion and use the money saved for other purchases.

The Charleston Area Regional Transportation Authority produced a holiday advertisement promotion and encouraged people to give public transit as a gift: “Wrap Up Their Commute. Drive Less. Save More.” Advertisements are used to combine the cost saving message with an environmental message, such as a promotional campaign by the Monroe County Transit Authority that featured the phrase “Fuel Your Wallet—Dump the Pump—Save the Environment.”

A South Carolina Tri-County Link promotional campaign takes advantage of a federal economic stimulus package: “Talk About a Great Economic Stimulus Package! Unlimited Ride on Weekly or Monthly Passes.” York Region Transit in Ontario, Canada produced a series of print advertisements featuring a dashboard fuel gauge and encouraged people to drive less and ride public transit more and use their cost savings for investments, retirement savings, and vacations.

Advertisements also emphasize the notion that riding public transit is less stressful for commuters than driving; the San Joaquin RTD produced radio advertisements announcing that the bus is convenient, hassle-free, and inexpensive. Similarly, Omnitrans in San Bernardino produced billboards/outdoor advertising featuring the phrase “To Us, Cheap and Easy is a Compliment.” Similarly, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority produced a “Problem–Solution” print advertising campaign (see Fig. 3) that suggests that riding public transit can help travelers overcome daily headaches—including the high cost of automobile fuel—associated with driving a car.

1.3. Public transit is a green alternative

A small share of print advertisements suggest that public transit is a green alternative to driving. The majority of advertisements exude wholesomeness and feature lush, green landscapes and images of children, such as a Rock Island County Metropolitan Transit District (Illinois) bus wrap (see Fig. 4). Other advertisements provide “factoids” about the benefits of transit travel over driving, including reduced emissions and improved air quality. Austin’s Capital Metro is featured in a reduce–reuse–recycle print campaign featuring the message “Clean Up Your Act! Show your Love for the Earth” and Mountain Metropolitan Transit Authority in Colorado Springs offered free rides on Earth Day



Fig. 1. Advertisement promoting cost savings for older adults, Butler Transit Authority. Image courtesy of Butler Transit Authority.

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