

Network Tele-Seminar

Best Workplaces for CommutersSM: Create Ads and PSAs that Get Action

Tele-Seminars provide valuable information to help Best Workplaces for CommutersSM Network members grow their own commuter programs and promote the Best Workplaces for CommutersSM brand. Moderated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), these seminars feature experts on key topic areas.

Opening Remarks

On September 2, 2004, Best Workplaces for CommutersSM held a Tele-Seminar to educate Network members about creating advertisements and Public Service Announcements (PSAs) that increase commuter participation in TDM programs. Patty Klavon, EPA's national Best Workplaces for CommutersSM Network manager, provided opening remarks and introduced the featured speakers.

Peggy Hetherington, Metropool

To meet the requirements of the Clean Air Act, the U.S. Congress required the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council to invest in advertising creative transportation options. Faced with this task, both organizations looked to Ms. Hetherington and Metropool to help them spend their money wisely.

The research project, which ultimately cost nearly \$100,000, began as a simple \$20,000 logo design task. Metropool was charged with the task of working with an advertising firm, the Plowshare Group, to design several logos that would be used to give a common identity to all of the TDM programs in the New York metropolitan area. As they began work,

however, they realized that the scale of their branding program would have to be much larger—possibly costing as much as \$15 million—to have a significant effect on the behavior of New York commuters.

To decide if they should actually invest that money, Ms. Hetherington and Metropool conducted a study that measured the success of existing communications. They evaluated print advertisements, television commercials, radio commercials, and logos. Specifically, the research team wanted to know what advertising messages would be effective in encouraging commuters to pursue commute alternatives. Did the test groups like or dislike the themes that were presented? What message did they think was being conveyed? Did they find it meaningful and relevant? Did their opinions change? Ultimately, what would be the best strategy to change people's attitudes toward commute alternatives? As a secondary goal, the research team wanted to discover how open individuals were to changing their commuting habits. In previous surveys, they had found that the majority of commuters were committed to driving their cars to work, no matter what options were available. This study aimed to address that question again.

The researchers interviewed twenty focus groups from different regions in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. They surveyed a wide variety of ages, occupations, incomes, and employer sizes. All of the survey subjects, however, shared a willingness to participate in an alternative commute program. Individuals who declared that they would not be very likely to participate in an alternative commute program were dropped from the survey.

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Ultimately, the survey had encouraging results: commuters' opinions could be changed. Subjects preferred options that they could explore gradually, and if they were pleased by a particular commute mode, they could use it more often. The research also found that the anti-pollution message of alternative commuting communications had been overdone and was losing its effectiveness. Advertisements that included celebrities were very effective—the survey subjects found them to be unique and attention-grabbing. Subjects also liked the idea of using public transit once a month to save money, decrease stress, and help the environment.

One aspect that Ms. Hetherington found fascinating was the level to which commuting affected people's lives. A number of her subjects commuted more than two hours each way to work. One man hadn't seen his two-month old child awake in three weeks because he had to leave so early in the morning to get to work, and didn't arrive home until late at night.

Ms. Hetherington cited two reasons that some commuters continue to drive alone to work, despite admitting that they don't enjoy their commute. One, they perceive their car commute as time alone to think. Two, they believe that public transit is not as convenient and will take longer than driving. She explained that it's not that these drivers don't know that they have an alternative, it's that the alternative is not being presented as better than their current commute mode. Subjects that had tried mass transit and returned to their cars had several reasons for returning to drive alone. They complained that buses were overcrowded, not on time, and not frequent enough. They would, however, give public transit another try if it could be shown that improvements had been made to the system. Overall, subjects did

not think that leaving their cars at home once a month was too much to ask of them. They did not want to be told what to do, but instead be able to choose when and how they would use public transit to best fit their schedule.

Ms. Hetherington found that employers routinely accept their employees' tardiness to work from slow traffic, considering it a cost of business, even though they believe that employee performance declines as a result of bad traffic conditions. They recognize that employees' productive time at work is lost as they adjust and unwind from their stressful commutes. They don't think that their employees' commute difficulties are their problem, however, and so they are not obligated to help remedy it.

The most startling finding of the survey was that HR managers, whom TDM professionals had previously considered their target customers and their best representatives within businesses, were found to be very resistant to the addition of commuter benefits. They perceived such benefits as not profitable enough and too labor-intensive for introduction into a larger benefits package. As a result of this finding, the strategy to market commuter benefits has changed. TDM organizations now are trying to increase commuter alternative awareness of both company employees as well as upper management.

Now that the research is complete, NYSDOT and the Transportation Council are ready to begin investing in a large-scale marketing effort. Based on the findings of the survey, they will encourage commuters to leave their cars at home just once a month and give public transit a try. They hope that those testing alternative commutes will decide not to leave their cars at home just once per month, but for good.



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Sara Burr, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Ms. Burr is the manager of Air Quality Education at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources; she works with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation on air quality and congestion mitigation. Her organization has been managing a public information campaign since 1993, and joined the EPA program “It All Adds Up to Cleaner Air” in the late ‘90s. Ms. Burr’s organization is committed to raising public awareness of air quality problems and to encourage individuals to make changes in their own lives that will improve the air.

Their advertising message is simple: “Small actions by many help to protect air quality and to reduce congestion.” They link that message to health, explaining how air quality can aggravate respiratory ailments, especially asthma. Working with the communications firm Knupp & Watson, they focus their efforts on commuters. To reach that audience, they devote a large portion of their advertising budget on radio spots during morning and evening rush hours. Ms. Burr advocated purchasing advertising time, despite its cost, instead of seeking public service announcements. She explains that purchased advertising has a much greater ability to reach its target consumer. In her campaign’s case, that meant reaching commuters on their radios during rush hour.

Ms. Burr’s team has produced a variety of print advertisements, including newspaper inserts with information about air quality, respiratory health, and transportation. They are currently experimenting with advertisements placed on gas station pumps to be viewed by people when they’re pumping gas. They have also begun to place ads on the Internet,

especially on the Web versions of local newspapers. Tying in with air quality and congestion reduction messages, Ms. Burr’s team also promotes driving habits—such as slow acceleration and respect for other drivers—that reduce traffic congestion and its correlated pollution. They partner with high schools and drivers’ education programs to expand the reach of their efforts.

Research that Ms. Burr and her team performed between 1993 and 2001 revealed that more than fifty percent of commuters felt that they were uninformed about air quality issues. In 2002, however, they found that 61% of respondents said that they did get enough information about the air quality in their area. She attributed that jump to the “It All Adds Up to Cleaner Air Campaign.” That concentrated effort to educate the public about air quality issues, which began in 1995, had started to show results.

The research also revealed that 95% of individuals feel as though their actions can make a difference in air quality. Ms. Burr noted, however, that in order for people to want to change their behaviors to improve the air, their new behaviors have to be very easy to implement. Tightening the gas caps on their cars, one of the easiest ways to reduce emissions, was the most commonly reported air quality improvement action.

Ms. Burr found that employees whose employers provide them with commuter benefits are much more likely to engage in alternative forms of commuting. She calls that effect “the infrastructure of behavior change.” The successes of the air quality and emissions reductions programs are rooted in employer participation, and so it is vital to market to employers and encourage them to provide commuter benefits.

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Anne Marie Thornton, Commuter Connections

Ms. Thornton coordinated a regional rideshare program and public service announcement campaign in Calgary, Canada. Commuter Connections manages and administers carpool.ca, an online ridematching service. They invest a significant amount of money in marketing—about 50% of their budget. Ms. Thornton explained, “If nobody knows about your carpool program, nobody will use it.”

The city of Calgary is a vibrant, community-oriented prairie city with a population of about 950,000 people. It is located in Alberta, Canada, directly above Montana. Commuter Connections began working with Calgary in October 2002, and was contracted to deliver a program in two stages. During the first stage, they partnered with the city's thirty largest employers to develop a corporate rideshare database. Between the months of October, 2002 and March, 2003, 1,100 employees registered in the database. During the second stage, they expanded the rideshare program to all companies in the region.

Commuter Connections received funding to increase public awareness of its carsharing program. Its public service announcements, developed by a third party contractor, cost roughly \$40,000 (Canadian). Commuter Connections worked closely with this contractor to ensure that the messages of their announcements were constantly “thought-provoking and maybe a little bit of fun.” Ms. Thornton's team did not want to have a negative message or to make people feel guilty about their commuting habits.

Commuter Connections' contracted advertising agency developed three television and two radio PSAs. They share the same background music, associating them all with a common brand. One

video ad focused on traffic congestion, another on fuel consumption, and the third on parking fees. The radio ads focused on the cost of driving and avoiding congestion.

In September 2003, Commuter Connections sent its announcements to media outlets around Calgary. During the city's first “rideshare week,” held that October, the PSAs were played regularly on television and radio stations. During that week, Commuter Connections hung banners across the streets of the city, performed media interviews, and worked with its corporate partners to get the rideshare message out in as many ways as it could. The campaign was a success, causing more than 30,000 people to visit the Commuter Connections Web site and helping the team meet its goal of 2,000 employees registered by the end of 2003.

Ms. Thornton and Commuter Connections found that PSAs were very effective, having been given a boost from the media attention given to rising fuel prices. Because none of the PSAs were dated, they could be run for several years without being revised. Ms. Thornton plans to use them again during this year's rideshare week. She noted, however, the importance of using several avenues to reach a target audience. PSAs were only part of a larger brand strategy.

Open Discussion

Dave Allen, from the City of Seattle, suggested that it might be a good idea to develop a single logo and brand for all TDM services nationally. Ms. Hetherington agreed, explaining that a single brand would allow the general public to recognize that all commuter service organizations serve the same purpose and are part of a single network. A national, recognizable brand could move carpool and vanpool toward the center of the commuter's mind,

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right alongside bus and rail transit. Mr. Allen explained that many TDM organizations with limited budgets could pool their resources to develop such a brand.

Ms. Burr added to the conversation, commenting on her experience in trying to establish a common brand identity through several counties in Wisconsin. She found that a number of TDM organizations did not want to give up their individual brand identity. Ms. Hetherington noted that her efforts to establish a common TDM brand in the New York area were also met with some resistance from organizations who felt as though their own identity would be lost within the larger brand. Ultimately, though, many of these organizations conceded when they saw that a single brand could be far more effective in raising public awareness than many smaller marketing efforts.

Cathy Blumenthal, from King County Metro, asked if any of the other TDM organizations used incentives to encourage commuters to use their carpool or vanpool programs. Ms. Thornton explained that Commuter Connections sometimes uses prizes, but often they have been donated by corporate partners. Ms. Burr noted that her organization relies on the

employers themselves to offer transit benefits and incentives to their employees. Clark Miller, from Knoxville, held a commuter week in which commuters who had saved the most gas from riding their bicycles, walking, or taking the bus were honored at a luncheon.

Tim Logan, in Ithaca, New York, asked Ms. Burr why she focused most of her organization's advertising in the summer months. Ms. Burr explained that summer is the season in which Wisconsin has the most air quality problems, so messages about removing cars from the road are particularly topical. Additionally, because Wisconsin is a tourist destination, traffic problems are worsened in the summer by additional volume.

Closing

Ms. Klavon concluded by asking for feedback at <www.bwc.gov> and encouraging Network members to participate in the next seminar, to be hosted in November. She thanked everyone for participating in the Best Workplaces for CommutersSM Network. If you have questions for the speakers, please call the Best Workplaces for Commuters Hotline at (888) 856-3131.