



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers



Measure and Report Your Impacts ...

.. and put a human face on those dry numbers.

By Matt Baker

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It's a challenge transit providers face constantly with today's economy: stagnant or, even, declining funding. According to Ed Redfern, of Drinker Biddle in Washington, D.C., who lobbies for transit providers, Kansas has become a "donor" state, subsidizing places like New York and Los Angeles. Every time Kansans fill up their cars at the pump, they pay more money into the Federal Transit Administration's Transit Trust Fund than the state is receiving back in grants. Redfern says Kansas "has to do a better job of getting our dollars back. We should not have to subsidize people in New York and Los Angeles and their transit systems. Transit is just as important in Kansas." Moreover, in this economic downturn, transit becomes even more important. Many times, transit is the only means of transportation for individuals in Kansas communities. And, as gas prices continue to climb, Redfern is adamant that there will be a spike in ridership.

All of this means transit providers need funding. To meet this funding challenge, transit providers need to find a way to convince local, state, and federal lawmakers that they do, in fact, deserve increased funding in these tight times. How can providers accomplish this feat? A National Rural Transit Assistance Program technical brief, titled *Measure and Report Your Impacts: How to Assess Your Impact and Tell Your Story*, suggests you tell stories about your community rather than just report table after table of dry and unexciting facts.

This is not a suggestion to do away with facts, but rather to animate those facts. Show how you make a positive impact on the people in your community.

Why report impacts? They:

- Demonstrate positive return on historic investment in your transit services;

- Make a compelling case for continued investment into the future;
- Demonstrate your culture of accountability and transparency;
- Help build greater awareness and understanding of your transit system;
- Organize key messages for your supporters and advocates.

Here's how to emphasize people and stories—not numbers:

Step 1: Establish impact criteria that will impress stakeholders. Just what do your stakeholders (and taxpayers) care about? This is what you need to determine. Local taxpayers want to know that you are providing great service at a reasonable price. The business community wants to know that you're getting their employees to work in a timely manner. Social service agencies want to know that you're providing access to their services on an equitable basis. And every stakeholder has a particular concern when it comes to your services. Don't think of it as a hindrance. After all, what would it mean if no one worried about your services?

Go out and get in touch with these stakeholders. Remember, they're often paying for your services (and paycheck). Find out what they care about. Just showing that you care about what they care about is a good first step to building a positive image of a transit agency that is in touch with its community. With their input, tailor data about your impacts to their particular concerns. Perhaps you can impress an environmental group by showing them how your services reduced emissions by removing cars from the roads.

Step 2: Put a measurement system into place to collect inputs. Once you have determined what will impress your stakeholders, you'll need to find a way to quantify it. Basically, you need to find a way to take real data and create a simple and convincing statistic from it. With respect to the emissions example, you could make an estimate of the emissions produced by the cars that would be needed to transport your transit riders and then subtract the emissions produced by your vehicles. The difference is the amount of fuel saved by using transit—and that you can measure.

With something quantifiable in mind, you can start to collect data to measure. This might be from a rider survey, passenger counts, or something less time-consuming like using Census data.

Step 3: Periodically collect data. Collect data methodically and regularly so that you can note ebbs and flows in ridership during the year. Keep it simple and remember that a lot of the data you may be looking for might be collected somewhere else. Don't add busywork when your staff could easily contact another agency that has the data in question. Also, if your data is going to be collected over multiple years, make sure to collect it during the same period each year so that the data is comparable and can show changes in ridership accurately.

Step 4: Analyze data and calculate the impact. Using the data collected by both your own agency and by other complementary agencies, your agency should be able to find a story to tell. The data might well show you something you never knew. It may also be that you already had observed a ridership trend or environmental impact but only had anecdotal evidence. Now, with numbers, you have a story with teeth. However, if there are gaps in your data, be sure to make this clear, because something like this could trip up an otherwise-compelling argument in front of lawmakers looking for a hole in your data. Whatever you report, it must be beyond reproach and you must have reliable data to substantiate it.

Step 5: Develop a “wow!” factor. So you have numbers. Numbers are boring. Numbers are dry and dull and people can get lost in numbers. You have to show the difference between what your community is like now, with your services, and what it was like before your services were in place. The difference is the story you are going to tell.

Losing funding does not simply mean your ridership is going to fall by 4,062 people. Losing funding means seniors are unable to get to the doctor's office, people cannot access

jobs, employers lose money, grocery stores lose patrons. As Redfern summarizes, “Cutting service means people losing jobs and going on welfare; it's that plain and simple.”

The RTAP report also suggests choosing language that specifically taps into the taxpayers in your community, on a personal level. For instance, instead of reporting the number of passenger miles provided, the Report suggests that you consider converting that number into the number of gallons of gasoline saved by transit trips. People spend a lot of money on gas. Calculate the dollars they could keep in their pockets. Show how those dollars will come back out of those pockets if transit services are cut. Tying your data into savings or dollars per person is an excellent way to pique the interest of your audience.

Step 6: Package data into an official-looking report. Anyone can put out a poorly-conceived report—one that is either very plain or over-laden with bells and whistles. Remember, the product you put out reflects the competency of your agency. All the data and all the compelling stories in the world can be sabotaged by a presentation that is boring or distracting.

Some important reminders from RTAP include:

- If you call your report an “annual report,” you'd better produce it every year.
- Don't spend so exorbitantly that the public thinks you spent more money on your report than you did on your service to them.
- Keep your materials consistent—consistency in appearance and tone is a mark of professionalism.
- Use quality images of your customers in your materials. What better way to reach your community than for them to see each other using your services in your materials? (Just make sure to get their permission.)
- Include testimonials; everyone connects with real stories from real people.

Step 7: Get your report in front of the eyes that matter. The very first thing you did in retooling the way you report impacts was to identify the needs of your stakeholders. Now, put this report in front of them. These persons are often well-connected in your community. They can spread your story much further through their personal connections than you can with a shiny booklet.

And, of course, put your report on the internet. This not only saves considerable printing and binding costs but also puts it in front of many more who may want to see it. Issue

Sources

- National RTAP Customer Driven Service Learner's Guide.
- Interview with Ed Redfern, Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP, Washington, D.C.
- Measure and Report Your Impacts: How to Assess Your Impact and Tell Your Story, National RTAP. <http://www.nationalrtap.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=FzkTDFEuizw%3d&tabid=1524>
- Assessment of the Economic Impacts of Rural Public Transportation, TCRP R-34.



With Whom Should You be Sharing Your Story?

This list of transit stakeholders, modified for Kansas from the Capital Area Regional Transit Coordination Committee Stakeholder List, Austin, Texas, provides a good jumping-off point for creating your own list of stakeholders with whom to share your story to create awareness and support for your services and the potential for assistance and partnerships.

General Public Transportation

- Public transportation authorities and agencies
 - KDOT coordinated transportation districts
- Intercity transportation providers
 - Amtrak
 - Greyhound
 - Jefferson Lines
- Public transportation funding agencies
 - U.S. Department of Transportation
 - Federal Transit Administration
 - Federal Highway Administration
 - Kansas Department of Transportation

Client Transportation

- Client transportation providers
 - Children's services providers
 - Developmental disability/mental health service providers
 - Meals on wheels
 - Medical transportation providers
 - Organizations that work with those in poverty
 - Parks and recreation departments
- Recipients of Section 5310 funding
 - Elderly service providers
 - Nursing home operators
 - Veterans' affairs service providers
- Health and human service agencies
 - Area agencies on aging
 - Kansas Department of Health and Environment
 - Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services
 - Kansas Department of Veterans Affairs
 - Kansas Department on Aging
 - Workforce investment boards

Regional Planning Organizations

- Metropolitan planning organizations
- Regional planning agencies

Local Government

- Representatives of city governments
- Representatives of county governments

Human Service Providers

- American Red Cross
- Domestic violence shelters
- Easter Seals
- United Way

Advocates

- AARP
- Disability awareness advocates
- Independent living organizations
- Kansas Public Transit Association

The Public

- Interested general public
- Users of public transportation

Other Transportation Providers

- Faith-based transportation providers
- Private sector providers
 - Limousine companies
 - Taxi companies
- Student transportation
 - K-12 unified school districts
 - Universities

Business Interests

- Local Chamber(s) of Commerce
- Businesses with transit stops

a press release that highlights the biggest impacts and that directs the public to your website.

What it all comes down to is focusing on mobility and access for people in your community, not just how many riders used the Route 77 bus last year. Remember, focus on big ideas and stories, not small numbers. This does not mean stop keeping track of the numbers, this means reformulating the calculations to show impacts on the people

in your community. Avoid complicated and snooze-inducing numbers. Keep things simple, yet powerful, and compelling. Put a face on the numbers. ●

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