



# Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

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

## Low-Cost Marketing Strategies for Rural Transit

By Pat Weaver

*Small business marketing strategies, adapted for transit.*

Jeff Slutsky of Entrepreneur.com suggests that small businesses that rely on customers in their local areas should first focus on networking with other area businesses, major employers, schools, churches and other organizations. He said that networking and then co-creating marketing strategies and events that are beneficial to all parties can bring big payoffs. Can these suggestions for small businesses be applied to rural transit agencies? Here are some of the marketing ideas suggested by Slutsky. Let's see how they might be adapted to fit a rural transit agency.

**1 Hand shake and a business card.** Slutsky says that there is this amazing new social networking tool that's become popular lately—a radical concept called meeting people in person. Whether you're a business owner or the general manager of your transit agency, make a point to introduce yourself to at least five people every week. You might be pumping gas or going to the grocery store, but say something like: "I'm Jane Doe, the general manager of Central County Transit. I just wanted to introduce myself. Are you familiar with the bus service here in Centerville?" If they aren't familiar with your service, pull out a business card with a free transit pass printed on the back, and sign and date it. Make sure that they know that it's a pass that can be used by them, their teenager, elderly parent, or anyone they know who might be in need of a ride.

**2 Cross promote with local merchants.** Consider working with local merchants on a promotion that is mutually beneficial. Provide a special certificate for a local business to pass out to customers or clients with a special transit offer, compliments of them. You get to promote your transit service, and the promotional partner gets to offer their customers a perk.

**3 Make local-area employees your VIPs.** Is there a major employer in your service area? Offering a discount to workers who show their name badge may seem like a good



*Make it a point to introduce yourself to five new people each week, whether at the gas station, grocery store, or wherever. Describe what you do. If they are not familiar with your service, give them your business card and a free pass for a bus rider—a pass anyone they know can use.*

idea, but often doesn't work because only those who are already customers take advantage of it. It may be better to persuade the employer to distribute a "VIP card" from your agency to each of their employees, offering a discount, perhaps with targeted transit routes and website information listed on the card. [e.g. "Routes 5 and 11 provide service to and from XYZ Enterprises on the half-hour. See <http://www.centralcountrytransit.org> for more information."]

Employees may stick the VIP card in their wallets or purses, and then decide to give you a try. Generally, you should offer a promotion for a set period of time, for example, 30 or 60 days. You then might want to repeat the VIP offer each year to help educate (and encourage) new employees about your services.

Consider initiating this option any time you know that an employer is hiring new employees. And don't forget, be sure to look at your services to this area prior to a promotion; visit with the employer to determine whether there are any service improvements you might be able to implement, like a slight shift in timing that would better meet the needs of their employees.

**4 Support fund-raisers—creatively.** Have you ever approached a restaurant owner asking that the restaurant contribute gift certificates or gift cards for your fund-raising event? Consider making it even more beneficial to the restaurant (or other business) and to your transit agency: Approach the business with the idea of your agency creating special certificates to be redeemed at the restaurant, to be handed out to each person who attends your fund-raiser. Each certificate would promise a \$5 donation from the restaurant to your agency, as long as the certificate holder spends at least \$10 at the restaurant (or another amount that is agreeable to the business).

In an example provided by Slutsky, 400 participants attended a fundraiser and received a certificate; the participating restaurant received 135 redemptions, including 45 first-time customers. The participating agency raised an extra \$710, and the restaurant got a shot at winning a dozen or so new regulars estimated to be worth about \$1,800 a year in sales. The restaurant achieved exposure, goodwill and new customers.

Strategies offered by Slutsky take little time, cost little, and generate awareness of your service which can lead to more riders. These approaches use the availability of your services as an incentive—instead of major media dollars.

Even though there is a cost in transit services given away, the risk is relatively low. If you are able to demonstrate how great your transit service is, they'll be back. ●

*Adapted from Five Low-Cost Local Marketing Ideas, by Jeff Slutsky. Slutsky is co-author with Dan Kennedy of No BS Grassroots Marketing, Entrepreneur Press, 2012.*  
<http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/223917#ixzz2OZFEgwod>

Reprinted from the October 2013 issue of the *Kansas TransReporter*, a publication of the Kansas Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) at the Kansas University Transportation Center.