

## **One-Stop Marketing Assistant for Marketing Commuter Benefits to Employees**

### **A Summary**

Although many employees are eager to sign up for commuter benefits, marketing commuter benefits to employees is a necessary element of a successful program. In some cases, employers will promote commuter benefits because the firm sees benefits to both itself and to employees when fewer drive alone to work. In other cases, employers in areas with mandatory trip reduction programs need to promote commuter benefits to help achieve trip reduction targets.

Before an employee can use a benefit, s/he must be aware of it, and awareness requires marketing. The importance of marketing is highlighted by survey results from Los Angeles showing that, "Awareness of most employer transportation programs continued to decline from 1998 to 1999 after a significant drop from 1996 to 1998. The decline in program awareness is likely to be the result of weakened regional marketing efforts...." (Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), 2000).

Marketing commuter benefits "is not a matter of preaching to the converted." People will change behavior in response to information and marketing. "[T]he single strongest predictor of switching behavior [away from single-occupancy vehicle (SOV) commuting] is extent of exposure to" an employer based commuter benefits program. (Weber, Nice, and Lovrich, 2000)

Marketing is a continuous part of a successful commuter benefits program. A marketing program should have regular visibility, because employees' commutes change during the course of their employment.

This briefing discusses both marketing strategies—the means used to communicate information with employees—and marketing messages—the substance and associations that form the content.

### **Marketing Strategies**

Employers can select from a variety of strategies to publicize commuter benefits to employees. Marketing techniques should be tailored to the individual employer—what messages its employees are likely to respond to, what communications technology employees use, the size of the employer, and whether there are one or more work sites. As with any new benefit, employers will want to raise awareness, and increase use, of commuter benefits among employees. Most employers will undertake two related marketing efforts: a kickoff campaign when an employer begins implementing a commuter benefits program and ongoing marketing efforts to ensure that both new and continuing employees are aware of the program.

### **Program Implementation and Launch**

One guide (UK Department of the Environment, Transport, and the Regions, 2000) recommends a three-step marketing plan for implementing commuter benefits: Introduce the plan with flyers and posters for visibility. Even before the plan is implemented, employees should be aware that a new benefit will be introduced.

Disseminate results from employee travel survey. Generally employers survey employees about their current travel patterns before implementing a commuter benefits program. These results should be publicized.

Launch the commuter benefits plan, preferably in conjunction with an event such as bike-to-work week, walk-to-work week, or wellness fairs. A major event gives the new benefit a higher profile. Events could be entirely employer-sponsored, or linked with region-wide events.

Larger employers seeking ways to solicit input from employees might convene focus groups. These provide valuable information to human resources and management regarding employees' problems with commuting, perceptions about changing modes from solo driving, and potential messages about the program.

### **Ongoing Marketing**

Keep the program prominent after the launch. In order for a program to be as effective as possible, employees need to be periodically reminded of it.

Employees' commute situations may change during the course of their employment, so even if they were not interested in participating initially or when they began employment, they may later become interested.

"Ridesharing [or any transportation decision] is not a 'onetime purchase'. The average rideshare arrangement lasts two and a half years." (SCAG, 2000)

An employee may transfer from a location not well served by transit to a downtown office, or move closer to the workplace. "A significant number of commuters change their work location and/or residence in a two year period." (SCAG, 2000)

Other circumstances may change; congestion along a corridor may worsen dramatically, or the employer may expand so that adequate parking is at a premium. Not surprisingly, satisfaction with the commute declines as congestion worsens (SCAG, 2000), and congestion is worsening in most metropolitan areas. An employee dissatisfied with the current commute is more receptive to a message about how to change, and employees will reach the threshold of dissatisfaction at different times.

Whatever the reason that an employee's commute and/or attitude changes, a marketing program with regular visibility ensures that when it does change, s/he has recently seen commuter benefits information. For all these reasons, employers should ensure that employees are aware of commuter benefits programs throughout their tenure with the employer.

Ongoing marketing includes three components:

1. Company **orientation** for new employees. This is an excellent time to introduce commuter benefits to new hires. Employers may also wish to use commuter benefits as a selling point for potential new hires during the recruitment process. Numerous employers have reported that commuter benefits are extremely useful recruiting tools. (U.S. EPA, 2001)

2. Ongoing **awareness** marketing includes: Advertisements in places seen frequently by employees (cafeteria, garage, elevators, etc.). Most employers have formal or informal areas for

disseminating information. Some employers with extensive commuter benefits programs have designated areas for program information and updates.

- Flyers/brochures/posters. These can be posted in visible locations, given out at orientation and special promotional events, and given to employees interested in the program. If there is a theme to the campaign, it should be featured prominently in these materials.
- Face to face meetings. This technique is more applicable for a small employer with one work site, but could also be used by a large employer in a group format. The commuter benefits staff can meet with interested employees one-on-one, give presentations to various departments, or speak at employer-wide events.
- Company newsletters. Monthly or quarterly newsletters are good opportunities to remind employees about commuter benefits. Refer to the employer case studies for more tips.
- Voicemail or email broadcast. If an employer regularly uses this channel to communicate, this is an excellent way to alert employees to changes in or deadlines connected with the commuter benefits (“This Friday begins open season for registering for transit vouchers....”). Employers should ensure that if such broadcasts are not accessible to all employees (for example, if some employees have no, or limited, computer access), then other strategies must be used to reach these workers. Also, employees already participating could have a separate list for special announcements.
- Inserts to paychecks. Because all employees receive paychecks or payroll advisories, this method ensures that employees will see the information.
- Company Web site or intranet. Usefulness depends on employees’ access to computers and whether information on other employer programs is also available this way. If employees are accustomed to obtaining information at a company site, information about commuter benefits should be posted here and updated as necessary.

3. Special **promotional events**. Special events call attention to a commuter benefits program in a very visible way. For example, an employers could sponsor a “Pool Day” to encourage car/vanpooling. Such days could be sponsored exclusively by the employer, coordinated with other area employers (for example, all the tenants of one building or office park could jointly sponsor such an event), or held in conjunction with area-wide promotions, such as a regional “Bike to Work Week.” Refer to Appendix A for additional tips for success.

#### **Marketing may also include incentives such as:**

Awards or prize drawings to recognize employees using transit or carpools. Awards can range from low value items such as t-shirts and commuter mugs to prizes such as generous gift certificates to area retailers and weekend trips. Employers can tie chances of winning directly to the frequency of non-solo driving. Alternatively, employers can set low requirements (for example, ridesharing once per week) for participation in awards programs to encourage wider use of ridesharing.

Commuter Club. Commuter Clubs are composed of members who do not drive alone to work at least a minimum number of days per week. Members may receive incentives such as gift certificates, discounts at participating merchants, and/or coupons.

#### **Role of the Commuter Champion**

In addition to the strategies employed, the Commuter Champion for commuter benefits—whether a human resources manager, benefits specialist, or employee transportation coordinator— plays a major role in the success of the program. If the administrator does not

drive alone to work, s/he can be an excellent advocate for the program and explain benefits based on personal experience. It also greatly aids the program to have a “champion” at the employment site, whether or not that person is the same one who administers the program. The office administering commuter benefits should be a repository of all necessary information for non-solo driving.

This includes employer-produced information such as:

- Detailed explanations of how benefits work (either standalone documents or information incorporated into a package on other benefits).
- Average cost or time savings for various benefits (for example, an explanation of how much money the average employee could save with parking cash out, including the cost of the space, decreased fuel cost, and wear-and-tear on the vehicle).
- Answers to employee questions. If the employer offers transit benefits, the person administering the program should also have transit information available, such as routes and schedules, so that an interested employee can obtain everything necessary to begin using transit. The same is true for vanpool schedules, park-and-rides, and bicycle parking information.

### **Measuring Employee Awareness**

Many employers use surveys to help determine the effectiveness of commuter benefit. Questions about awareness of the program could be added to surveys to find out how many employees are aware of the program and to what extent (for example, they may have a vague idea that such a program exists but not understand the details). A survey could also be used to solicit ideas for how to better market the program.

### **Marketing Messages**

The messages that the employer uses to promote the program are important. Some of the messages below, selected from various programs, may be useful in persuading employees to try switching from solo driving:

“We encourage you,” not “You have to.” Employees can be skeptical of efforts to reduce solo driving if they see the program as mandatory. Marketing should emphasize that employees have the option of trying other commute modes. One guide (UK Department of the Environment, Transport, and the Regions, 2000) recommends paying particular attention to language, noting that employers should say, “We encourage people to try alternative modes” instead of “We would like people to use alternative modes.”

“Try another mode at least once.” Employees may be more easily convinced to switch from solo driving once they have successfully tried other modes. The goal is a “conversion experience”—a personal experience more powerful than any factual information or testimonials from other people. For example, Penny Baxter, Vanpool Coordinator at University of California at San Diego, has a program in which potential riders can ride for three days free on a trial basis.

While Ms. Baxter did not have figures available on the number of people who had tried this option, she said that everyone who has tried it has become a regular rider. Employers may wish to give incentives for trying non-solo driving modes at least once, in order to promote such conversion experiences.

“Switching can be incremental or occasional.” Because the prospect of stopping solo driving altogether may be daunting, employees may be more responsive to a message that encourages them to use other modes occasionally. The Regional Public Transportation Authority (Phoenix, Arizona) sponsored a “Don’t Drive One in Five” campaign aimed at encouraging people to change modes once per week.

“Reduce stress by not driving alone.” According to research cited in the Washington State Employee Transportation Coordinator (ETC) Handbook, “reducing stress” is the primary motivating benefit in encouraging employees to switch modes from solo driving. Marketing materials on this topic can include images of frustrated commuters stuck in traffic, breathing smog, and risking accidents.

“Save money.” This is the second motivating benefit cited in the Washington State ETC Handbook. Although messages will differ depending on whether the employer provides benefits or the employee pays for them with pre-tax dollars, either arrangement saves the employee money. If an employer offers parking cash out benefits, marketing messages can emphasize that the employee takes home more money by giving up a parking space.

“Improve Your Health.” Encourage employees to resolve to get in better shape, save money, give back to the community, and help protect the environment. All of these resolutions can be fulfilled by one simple action—drive their car less! Try biking, walking, or riding the bus to work or when they do errands. They’ll get more exercise, save money they would otherwise be spending on gas and parking, improve air quality, and help promote a sustainable transportation system for the community.

“Help the environment.” Although this tends to influence commuting decisions far less than personal considerations, for some employees reducing pollution may be a motivating factor. It may also be a factor in areas where poor air quality is widely perceived as a problem. For example, a survey for the Regional Public Transportation Authority (Phoenix, Arizona) found that more than half of respondents had a household member who experienced health problems when pollution levels were high. Employers can emphasize these messages in conjunction with regional clean air campaigns, such as “Ozone Action Days.”

Some employers write tag lines for their marketing campaigns that emphasize their message, and use the slogan throughout their marketing materials. Employee Perceptions and Demographics The Washington State ETC Handbook emphasizes the importance of identifying employee attitudes and targeting marketing messages accordingly. They divide employees into five groups:

1. Dedicated non-single occupant vehicle (SOV) commuters. This group can provide excellent examples and testimonials, as well as direct implementation assistance. The program should be sure to reward people in this category.
2. Borderline non-SOV commuters. They have a strong interest in ridesharing, but need encouragement to make the change from solo driving. Personal attention to this group is recommended.
3. Passive solo drivers. This group is unaware of or has only a mild interest in ridesharing. It is important to convince this group that potential benefits outweigh perceived drawbacks.

4. Borderline anti-high occupant vehicle (HOV) commuters. This group will require strong incentives to switch from solo driving. They may try ridesharing only after it becomes the workplace norm.

5. Dedicated solo drivers. This group enjoys driving alone and is very unlikely to change. A program should not waste time on this group.

The same handbook also cites research from the Washington State Department of Transportation that found the most receptive employees for non-SOV commuting are 25-44 years old; work at professional, skilled labor, or administrative jobs; have at least some college education; and are middle class or upper middle class.

A more in-depth analysis of Washington State's data developed a useful portrait of the switcher: the employee who switched from driving alone to some other mode. (Weber, Nice, and Lovrich, 2000) They found that switchers:

Are more aware of a Commute Trip Reduction (CTR) program.

Come from organizations where the CTR program is strongly supported.

Engage in other activities promoting environmental stewardship.

Are less concerned with the "convenience and flexibility" costs and benefits of SOV commuting than non-switchers.

Perceive the presence of reasonably convenient alternatives to SOV travel.

Marketing can help on four of the five points listed above.

1. Increase program awareness.
2. Demonstrate organizational support for the program.
3. Highlight the environmental benefits of switching.
4. Provide information on reasonably convenient alternatives to an SOV commute.

The fact that those most likely to switch are less concerned about convenience and flexibility does not mean that marketing should ignore this point. Those most ready to switch might need less persuasion on this point, but others do need information of convenience, and many will respond to it.

## Appendix A

### Ten Tips for a Successful Commute Options Event

1. **Promote, promote, promote!** Before your alternative commuting event begins, make sure employees know about it. Place advertisements for it in common spaces, in the company newsletter, and on the intranet Web site.
2. Set up an **alternative commuting booth or table** in the main entry hall of your worksite. Have a colorful, eye-catching display. Stand by the space during peak hours (8:30-9:30 AM and 4:30-5:30 PM) to hand out brochures and answer questions.
3. **Give every employee a reason** to stop at your table. Offer coffee and donuts (if early in the day), candy, or items like travel mugs or clip-on reflectors for walkers and cyclists.
4. Use the “**everybody does it**” method of persuasion. It’s important to let employees know that using an alternative mode of transportation is fun, cost-effective, and, importantly, mainstream.
5. Establish a list of employees who already use an alternative mode. **Encourage drive-alone commuters to talk to these employees.**
6. Make sure employees **leave your table with something in their hands**—a brochure, a flyer, a postcard, or a business card. You might not be able to convince them to change their commuting habits after talking to them for only a few minutes, but when they do think about it (after a particularly bad day’s commute), they should know where to get more information about their commuting benefits.
7. Show employees that their **coworkers have already had success** using alternative modes of transportation. Incorporate your commuting awards program into the alternative commute event and include employee testimonials in your materials.
8. **Ask that your president or CEO walk or ride a bicycle to work and say a few words about alternative transportation.** It will show employees that the whole company is devoted to changing the way it commutes.
9. To **promote** bicycle commuting, ask your local bicycle shop to perform free tune-ups on employees’ bicycles. It’s good advertising for the shop, and you can promote your commuter benefits program to your employees while they wait for their bicycles to be fixed.
10. Work closely with your local **Transportation Management Association.** They will have the information and materials you need to make a powerful impression on your employees. They might also send a representative to help you answer your employees’ questions.