

DAN DIRKS: I ran a regional transit system in the Detroit area for 10 years. I've worked in public and community transportation for over 30. Our transit system in the 90s had some significant problems. They were called money problems like many are experiencing right now. And it was really not out of will, but out of necessity that forced us to look for new partners, and the business community was one of them. And I was fortunate, we were fortunate at Smart, that we had a board of directors that allowed us to be extremely creative. We could try things. If they worked, fine. If they didn't, you know, we'd cut our losses and be able to go. And I've always been extremely appreciative of that.

The first thing, and I think the most important thing for any public and community transportation provider, is the initial impression is so important. So that no matter how you reach out to the business community, if your buses are dirty, if your on-time performance is bad, you're selling a bad product. And to the business community, you know, being able to have a good product is probably the most important thing. Even if your buses don't travel every 5 minutes, it's maybe every 2 hours, if that bus is clean, on time, your driver is courteous, and people know it's reliable, it's a lot better than running a service every 20 minutes where the buses don't show up half the time, the buses inside and outside are dirty, and whatever, whatever. And I can't emphasize that enough because that is probably the single-most important thing that you can do is to run good service. And if it means relooking at yourselves, reinventing yourself, working with your employees, in doing that, it's worth doing, absolutely.

The other thing is I'm going to try to give you some tips of things that we learned, some different things we tried. And most worked, some didn't. One that really to kick-start and to make sure that we were running well, we started a money-back guarantee program on all of our services. We were the first, and we advertised this all over the place, we're the first bus company in America to have an unconditional money-back guarantee program, that for any reason if you wanted to—if you rode our service and you weren't happy with that service, you get your money back. You'd fill out a form, send it to Smart, and we'd give you your \$1.50 or \$1.25, whatever the fare was. That wound up costing us a significant amount of money, about \$10.00 a month. It's not that we didn't receive complaints. We received complaints. But I think our customers understood there's a difference between an occasional problem and one where you want your money back. And the nice thing that it did internally among our employees, which was probably as significant as everything, is we were a larger system, we operated about 50,000 trips per day. We had competition between our three terminals because it encompassed three counties and none of them wanted those money-back guarantees. And if—the terminal managers would get furious if they'd get a money-back. Not that the other complaints weren't important, but they did not want those money-backs. The other thing that we did relative to complaints, and again, it goes back to the operating good service, I made our terminal managers call everyone that complained at Smart within 24 hours of the complaint. Might not have the result, it's just—and you know, I found that myself, that if I complain and someone gets back to me and says, "You know, Mr. Dirks, I don't have that answer right now, it might take me 3, 4 days, 5 days, but I'll get back to you," I'm fine. I just want to know that somebody's doing that. And I have to tell you what's really interesting. Our complaints went down significantly because I think what happened was the terminal managers didn't want to make the calls and they kind of pushed their folks to do a little bit better job. And it was really—our customers acknowledged that right away. So between the money-back and following up on complaints and really—we also set up some internal processes where our drivers could talk to our maintenance staff

immediately if they had a problem. It's not like you filled out a card and it had to go to dispatch. There was ongoing dialogue between our maintenance employees and really the union at each of the terminals for our drivers. That was very, very helpful also because if there was a problem on a specific bus, say there was a problem with air conditioning and we needed a part, we didn't get 50 cards saying you need to fix the air conditioning. Once that communication among the employees came down, they were much more tolerant of it. And we tried to be tolerant of our employees too. Whenever the temperature reached above 90, whether we had air conditioning or not, we gave our drivers water to take out with them. I mean, it's a simple gesture but, you know, it really works. And consequently our employees and between maintenance and transportation management really developed a team atmosphere.

Some of the other things we did is we developed what's called the "get a job, get a ride" program. And again, I think we were the first ones in the country to do that. That is, if you get a new job, right, especially—face it, most of the folks that use public and community transportation are transit-dependent. They usually tend to be entry-level workers, you know? They need—they're seniors and they're people with disabilities and youth. So you first get a job and you don't get a paycheck for at least a week, right? Or two sometimes. How do you get there? You know, how do you pay for public transportation to get there? Well, our program was, let's say we have the Smith Company and they were one of our "get a job, get a ride" companies. And if a person got a job, the human resource person for the Smith Company would say, "How are you getting to work?" And they'd say, "Well, I plan on using public transportation." "Well here, fill out this form and we'll be able to get you the first month free. Your first month's bus pass for free." Because we found that if you can get a person when they first get a job, if you can get them to use public transportation when they're changing their habits, chances of keeping them are a lot higher. And instead of having the individual go through the transit system, we wanted to partner with that local business. And that tended to work very well because after that person was hooked and they were using public transportation, we'd have some folks go out and meet with the business, we'd tell them how successful it is, and by the way, we have this voucher program, this program which is a non-taxable benefit for your employee and you can claim it on your IRS and whatever. And we try and sell them on the whole idea of the voucher, which tended to work some of the time. Not great, but it tended to work some of the time.

One of the other things we did early on in the process was we, as a forerunner to mobility managers, we did this back in the 90s, we hired what we call our ombudspersons. And again, we had a three-county area. We hired one ombudsperson for every county. And the idea with this person is, and we tended to try and not hire transit people for those jobs because transit people think too much like transit, whereas a community person tends to think more of the community and that's really what it's all about. Here's the scenario. You're a business. You want to get on this voucher program. You want to know if Smart would change the bus service to go a little bit later at night because your shift ends at 9:30 and the last bus is at 9:15. And is there any way that you can move the bus stop a little bit closer? Because it's right now, you know, about a quarter-mile away, we'd like it a little bit closer. Well, they'd call into Smart and it was great for us. They'd call and talk to the bus stop person, and then they'd transfer them to the fare person, and then they'd transfer them, and they'd transfer them, and they'd transfer them. And you know yourself. When you get transferred, you get frustrated. I don't care if people are dealing with you, they get very frustrated. The ombudsperson would take that call and they'd

do all of it. And what was really wonderful, we really pushed the—and again, that’s the advantage of having a non-transit person almost because they had to get to understand this. If we had to have a meeting with our scheduling department, for an example, in the local business on travel times and bus schedules and whatever, the ombudsperson would in essence almost be like an advocate. Well, they were. An advocate for that business. And I knew it was working when our operations staff, and one of our ombudspersons was from Macomb County, still there. His name’s Fred. And I remember our paratransit guy saying, “Who in the hell does Fred work for? The business or does he work for us?” And I’d say, “That’s exactly the point. That’s exactly what his job is.” And you know, it took, again, our staff time to figure out the value of the ombudspeople, but they love them now. They still are not wild about some of the things they propose, but you know, it tends to work really well.

One of the other things we did was something creative called Job Express. A Job Express, for us—we had pretty good fixed-route service in terms of quality. We tried to get the routes down to a manageable time for people to use, but what happens if you work a quarter-mile, a half a mile from the bus stop? You’re just, you know—because especially when you get into suburban job growth areas, you know, it’s a little bit distance away. That half a mile or quarter-mile can almost be a larger barrier than going 20 miles to get to that point. And so we tried this idea with paratransit buses called Job Express. And that’s a story in itself how we got there. At one point, Smart’s paratransit scheduling staff and fixed-route scheduling staff were fifteen miles away. They never talked to each other. We came up with this idea of let’s put their desks right next to each other. You know, let’s see what might happen. And sure enough, we put them together and our paratransit and fixed-route scheduling staff came up with the idea of Job Express. The idea is this. We know that most folks travel during peak travel periods, so why not at the major transfer point, at the major point where people are getting off, and we tried to do that usually at shopping centers or at other significant traffic generator, have the small bus meet them when they get off and take them anywhere they want to go within a mile of that point. Then the idea would be, on the way back, this is what management thought. All they’d have to do is call into our dispatch center, right, tell us what time they wanted to be picked up within a 2 hour timeframe, and we’d have that small bus take them back. Well, that sounds good. But when we met with our staff about it, our operations staff and our drivers, they looked at us, us management folks, like we were a little crazy. And it’s like, well, what’s so bad about that? Why don’t you just have the a.m. driver write on the sheet of paper what time the guy needs to be picked up on the back—you know, at the end of the day? Why make them go through and make a phone call and talk to a dispatcher when it’s just a simple, bright 4:30 right next to their name? And I love technology. I mean, it can do some great things. But you know what? Keep it as simple as you possibly can. Use your employees.

Well, that Job Express worked. We tried it in three quarters, and remember we had three counties, and everything we did, every county wanted us to try something in their area. We tried it along a industrial corridor in Macomb County and that worked really well. We tried it along—and so, what we were doing was not serving retail, but was real light manufacturing. And I got another story with that. We tried it in a suburban, downtown area, an older suburban, downtown area, Royal Oak. And then we tried it at strictly a retail area on the west side of town in Dearborn. The one in Macomb County, the light industrial, took off. I mean, it’s still going gang-busters. The one in Dearborn is working extremely well. Royal Oak, we couldn’t get it to work for nothing. We tried about four or five different things. And we think one of the reasons was because there was a lot of different routes coming into that

area, and in many cases people would have rather transferred onto a fixed-route bus than go onto that smaller bus, for whatever reason. So we took that—the buses allocated for Royal Oak and we shifted it to a retail mall about 4 miles north and that one took off, so. Again, I can't emphasize enough the freedom we had with our board to be able to try things. And if it didn't work, not that they didn't care, but they worked with us on it. The other thing we did was in, as—because our board was composed of the chief elected officials in every county, we worked with their planning and economic development folks also. We tried to tie everything in.

One of the other things we did that really was kind of helpful to the business community was with paratransit buses we did a lot of what we call site-to-sites. There are a lot of senior high-rises and what we were tending to see was a lot of seniors and people with disabilities wanting to go to the local grocery store all different times during the day. Why not if we try and group those trips as much as possible and have like two trips a week on Mondays and Thursdays from 9 to 10:30 to go to the local grocery store? The other thing we did was we met with the local grocery store, who in many cases would add benches for them. They would try and make sure they had enough cashiers there at that timeframe. That worked out really well for us. And some of them even wound up giving out coffee and, you know, little doughnut holes and whatever. We had some really good luck with that. A lot of businesses, especially, you know, local businesses that weren't of a national nature tended to be—tended to help us with that a lot too.

We were also able to get some businesses to sponsor cleaning bus shelters and bus stops, and we'd let them put their name up alongside of it. That was really good because that—you know, the worst part about a bus shelter is not putting the bus shelter up. There's a fixed cost to that. But you have to clean it on a regular basis, oftentimes once or twice a week. So if you had a local business that was willing to clean that shelter or stop a couple of times a week for you, you didn't have to contract that out or send your employees out. And you allowed them to say this bus stop is sponsored by the Smith Grocery Store. That worked really well.

One of the other things, I picked up a couple of other—well, one of the things that we didn't do that was—it was always something I wanted to do is the whole idea of rideshare and vanpools. There are a lot of really, really good examples across the country. The Chicago area, the state of Washington, where an ombudsperson-type will go into a business and help them set up vanpools for their employees. And in most of the cases, the employees can get a discount on it by working with the employer, or the employer might contribute what they would in a voucher. And it works tremendously well. The rideshare responsibility in our region was not with the local transit system, it was the MPO and I tried to wrestle it away from them, but wasn't successful. But I strongly urge you to consider in your scheme of things in working with the business community, especially whether you have that responsibility or not, to work with the local group that does. And so when you meet with employers, do that, try that. I think it's got a lot of potential.

I mentioned one of the things that didn't work was the Job Express. Another thing that we tried that just didn't quite work, I was really concerned about transportation at night. You know, there's a lot of folks that get off work not at 9 o'clock or 10 o'clock when the stores end, but like at—when they work in the food industry, it's 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning. And naturally our service levels weren't what they were at 7 o'clock at night. What we tried to do is to work with some of the local cab companies and give them our transfers so that—and it would just be one way, we didn't want any money. The idea was we'll

give the cab company a transfer, the person would use the cab, get to the main line, and then transfer onto a route that might go 10 miles where they need to go. The cab companies really liked the idea. We worked with a couple to try and get it going. They really liked that idea. The problem was with basically with the security of the transfers themselves. They didn't have a level of comfort that their—some of the cab drivers might not try and sell those if you assigned it to them. So that's kind of where we were going on that.

Well, I'm going to try and wrap this up. The other thing we tried to do is working with the business community is get very much involved with them. We would even meet with individual businesses. Hospitals, for an example, that's a business that you should be tied in very close. I know a lot of you take their patients to them. We went to one hospital, for an example, and we estimated we had 5,000 rides to them on a yearly basis. And if you figure that they're billing each for those individuals by approximately \$500 per visit by the time they run tests and everything, that equates to \$2.5 million that they're able to bill. And so all of a sudden transit goes from being this, oh yeah, transit's out there, to, you're doing what? And oftentimes it's finding the right person at the business. Might be the CEO, might be the human resource director. And I urge everyone that I can talk to about any of this is to use Google searches. A lot of times you're going to find indirect ways of getting to people.