

# **How Customer-Appealing Design and Branding Win New Riders: Data and Best Practices**

**Cliff Henke**

**Sr. Analyst,**

**Parsons Brinckerhoff Inc.**

**Arcadia, California**

## **ABSTRACT**

Both transit systems' preferences and anecdotal evidence have pointed to the positive effects branding has on transit service areas, but until recently with the advent of BRT service no hard data has existed to prove such a link. New analysis and customer survey data now suggest what transit managers have believed: that appeal vehicle design and strong service branding do win new riders out of their cars, independent of other service improvements such as frequency, capacity and travel time.

However, the branding must be well coordinated with these and other service elements so that the image and branding "back up" the other service improvements in a way that these changes mean something to riders and the communities being served.

This paper will present these new industry findings, including best practices used here and abroad. A list of "do's and don'ts" regarding image, branding and vehicle design will also be presented.

## **DOES IMAGE WIN RIDERS?**

Since the development of the PCC streetcar — perhaps even longer—the public transportation industry has been concerned about changing its image to win riders from their automobiles. Indeed, virtually every new rail start since the passage of the Urban Mass Transportation Act in 1964 has been an effort to change commuter patterns, and rail has been perceived as a good way to change that image. Part of that image, of course, is the nature of rail transit versus bus transportation: Rail typically travels in its own right-of-way, often removed from the rest of traffic in urban areas and receiving priority at signalized intersections where it shares the same streets. Bus transportation, while more flexible, typically struggles in the same traffic as other vehicles and more often than not receives no priority when stopped at traffic signals.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, quietness and smoothness of rail transit's electric traction or the roominess of the vehicles have also been perceived as advantages over buses. Finally, and

perhaps most importantly, the intangible perception of rail transit as "the mode of choice" for those who have a choice in the way they commute has enjoyed an advantage over the perception of the bus as the option for people with no other options—the mode of the transit dependent.<sup>2</sup>

This also may be borne out by FTA policy. In travel forecasting, modelers are able to employ something called a "modal bias" in their forecasts. The "bias" is a constant that can be applied because it is generally agreed that part of the ridership gain in a rail system cannot be explained by traditional factors, such as travel time savings, frequency of service or the convenience/inconvenience of transfers, particularly from one mode to another.

What is the actual experience of the industry regarding ridership and image? Several studies have shown a clear shift in commuting patterns when major transportation investments are opened. Although most of these studies have been conducted of rail systems, that has begun to change thanks to recent BRT openings. According to an analysis of ridership studies in six early BRT systems, patronage of the corridors of these new systems increased by a median of 41% with an average of a third of this increase coming from former auto commuters.

The same study, however, could not attribute this success directly to vehicle design, branding, image or any other marketing strategies. Yet there were plenty of statements from customers and officials in these communities that indicated that image and vehicle design had something to do with it.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, several studies have determined that as much as a third of ridership gains or increases in overall service customer satisfaction with BRT service cannot be explained by traditional factors such as travel time, frequency, reliability or capacity improvements.<sup>4</sup>

Another suggested that branding and image comprises most of this "unexplained" aspect, and that it accounts for between 10% and 21% of the ridership gain with BRT<sup>5</sup>

## **BRANDING DO'S AND DON'TS**

## ***B – Partnering for Success***

Most early BRT systems that have opened in this country have done so with strong identity, image and branding. They have emulated some of the best branding among new starts in rail transit, and that of good branding in general. Metro Rapid in Los Angeles, for example, featured a strong, identifiable red and white brand for both its buses and its stations, reinforced by good marketing literature. “Fast, frequent and fabulous” was the tag line used by the service, which debuted in the summer of 2000.

Yet it was not all about brand. The identity communicated clear service distinctions from the local bus service in the region. The service plan featured more of an express route structure with stops spaced approximately half a mile apart. In addition, the schedules were headway based, meaning that at peak periods service was scheduled at five minute intervals or less. Finally, automated signal priority using ITS technologies was employed to ensure that buses in the service adhered to these headways. If a bus was observed to be ahead of the headway parameter it would receive a shorter green light or a longer red light at the next traffic signal; if it was found to be behind schedule, it would be given a longer green light or a shorter red light at the next signal.

The branding did not extend to vehicles at the initial stages of Metro Rapid. The initial lines of the service employed the traditional low-floor buses used elsewhere on the local bus routes. The more stylized higher-capacity buses were introduced later.

By contrast, in both Las Vegas and Eugene, OR, the vehicle styling was an integral part of the marketing, branding and image of those cities’ systems from the beginning. Las Vegas chose one of the most stylized and technologically advanced (as well as one of the most expensive) vehicles used in BRT service anywhere in the world. Eugene, after determining that the Dutch-manufactured vehicle it originally wanted, an articulated hybrid-electric vehicle of equal or greater complexity than the French made vehicle in Las Vegas, eventually procured a stylized articulated Buy America-compliant vehicle manufactured by New Flyer Industries. In addition to the branding (called Metropolitan Area Express, or MAX, in Las Vegas and Emerald Express, or EmX, in Eugene) employed the same route, signal priority and image strategies as was done in Los Angeles. In addition, Las Vegas and Eugene featured much more substantial stations with ticket vending machines and proof-of-payment fare systems as well as exclusive running ways, which was not done in Los Angeles until it debuted its Orange Line in October 2005.

Following are two lists of good practices in branding gleaned from the general branding literature and these case studies as well as the pitfalls to avoid.

First, the good practices to emulate:

- Be clear and consistent
- Choose branding that resonates
- Promote promote promote

Here are the pitfalls to avoid:

- Don’t overpromise
- Don’t undermine brand with service decisions later
- Don’t forget to coordinate brand strategies (rail, bus, BRT) but
- Don’t overcomplicate

## **CONCLUSION**

Branding and image matter, certainly to the mayor, board members and community stakeholders supporting a BRT project and especially in the initial phases of adoption of this new mode. The reason is that it must distinguish itself from other, more well-established modes. Early studies suggest that branding and image are responsible for a median of 15% of the 41% median ridership gains that BRT projects have achieved. Put another way, branding and image alone account for a six percent ridership improvement, and it likely is disproportionately from choice riders. Yet it no accident and like other aspects of service delivery, must be part of a complete BRT project strategy.

## **REFERENCES**

- <sup>1</sup>Brian J. Cudahy, *Cash, Tokens and Transfers: A History of Urban Mass Transit In America*, New York, Forham University Press, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup>Paul Weyrich, *Bring Back the Streetcars*, Washington, DC, Heritage Foundation and American Public Transportation Association, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup>Matthew Peak and Lawrence Wnuk, *Analysis Ridership Trends in BRT*, Pasadena, CA, WestStart-CALSTART, September 2005.
- <sup>4</sup>Michael R. Baltes, “Statistical Estimation of the Importance Customers Place on Specific Elements of Bus Rapid Transit,” *Proceedings of the 2003 Mid-Continent Transportation Research Symposium*, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, August 2003.
- <sup>5</sup>Stephen Falbel, Pilar Rodriguez, Hebert Levinson, et als., “Bus Rapid Transit Plans in New York’s Capital District,” *Journal of Public Transportation*, Volume 9, No. 3, Summer 2006.

