

Taking Stock in What You Have: A Case Study

By Josh Naramore

I N THREE YEARS LIVING IN MY HOUSE, I have passed through the kitchen countless times. The shades that hung above the kitchen windows never impressed me, but when I spontaneously removed them last weekend, I was taken aback by the change. I had more light and could see the beautiful wood trim surrounding the window, and all it took was a different perspective.

Sometimes when things have existed for a long time, we take them for granted, especially in the public sector. It's important for cities, universities, airports, and other institutions that offer transit service to continually revisit their brand and marketing and not take these assets for granted.

For almost 40 years, the City of Grand Rapids, Mich., has operated a transit service to shuttle commuters from remote parking facilities to job centers throughout our downtown area. This service is paid for with parking revenue and has recently gone through a transformation to better meet the growing demands of the city.

History of DASH

The city has operated a transit service since the 1970s; it was originally branded as the Grand Rapids Urban Shuttle—the Gus Bus. In the 1990s, Gus was rebranded to the Downtown Area Shuttle (DASH), with new colors, logo, and bus wraps. Commuters showed their parking cards and received free transit trips. The service was offered Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. DASH offered 10-minute service from 6 to 9 a.m. and from 4 to 6 p.m. and 30-minute service the rest of the day.

DASH continued without revision for nearly 20 years. Ridership remained flat during those years with about 1,000 rid-

ers per day. The service routes had not kept up with changes in the downtown development environment.

Grand Rapids has changed dramatically. There are thousands more residents, and employment has grown to almost 50,000 employees. A new convention center increased the number of downtown visitors, and Van Andel Arena hosts a growing number of concerts, special events, and games of the Grand Rapids Griffins, the American Hockey League affiliate of the Detroit Red Wings. With all this growth and change, DASH faced new challenges and opportunities.

The Rebrand

I did not realize what the DASH was until a few months after starting my job with the city. Yet, our department was responsible for the service. A free transit shuttle was a huge asset that was not being fully leveraged—only a small percentage of commuters even knew about it.

Our convention and visitors bureau requested that the city explore increasing DASH service to weekends and later hours of service and rebrand its look and feel. The city partnered with a private marketing firm, The Grey Matter Group, and worked with downtown employers, residents, hotels, and daily users to devise ways to improve the service.

We went into the rebrand exercise with eyes wide open and a willingness to change everything. After ridership surveys of users and drivers and focus groups with other stakeholders, the city decided to keep the name. Our team spent six months workshopping logo designs and color palettes and testing



The Gus Bus.
started operating
in the 1970s



marketing tag lines. We also thoughtfully worked through changes to service routes and hours of operation. Instead of focusing solely on the Monday-Friday daytime commuter population, the service was expanded to target growing retail and service employment as well as visitors.

In August 2018, the new DASH service started with two new routes that offer seven-day service and late-night weekend service. Expanded hours give visitors attending special events access to cheaper parking in remote parking lots. Bus headways are maintained consistently at seven to eight minutes all day. DASH got a refreshed logo and color scheme, along with maps and marketing materials in English and Spanish. For the first time, the city also began purchasing advertising on billboards, at event venues, and in local businesses to market DASH.

The Future

The expanded service has increased our service costs by 50 percent. Ridership has increased 30 percent year-to-year and continues to grow every month. Parking revenue in historically underutilized surface lots is up 20 percent over previous years. Because of responsiveness of the hotel and visitor businesses to the changes, the city is exploring the potential for private revenue to help offset some of the increased costs. There is also new demand from residents, employers, and businesses to expand the DASH service into neighborhood business districts outside downtown.

The city has partnered with our downtown development authority and will leverage funding to install improved transit shelters at all DASH stops. These will include solar lighting, trash/recycling receptacles, benches, improved signage, and advertising panels. These ad panels combined with selling advertising space on buses will help pay for snow removal

and cleanup at all stops. We've also started purchasing new compressed natural gas vehicles and will test electric vehicles in partnership with our regional transit agency. All the new vehicles will have more transparent windows to better allow riders to see out and be seen.

The DASH rebranding has demonstrated to our community the effects of expanded mobility accessibility by thoughtfully updating something that has existed in plain sight for a long time. Remember the shades on the window? Often we, as transportation professionals, are under pressure to deliver better customer service by purchasing new technologies or larger capital investments. Sometimes, taking stock and understanding the existing assets in our communities can have a more significant impact. ♦



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