

TDM's New Millennium Partner: The Green Revolution

By Susan Tordella, Director of the MetroWest/495 Transportation Management Association

There's scant glamour to the TDM livelihood.

Convincing people to leave the comfort of their private, convenient, status-statement automobiles is akin to convincing people to go on a diet. Like driving alone, sugar, butter and super-size servings are addictive. Dieting is no fun. Often, a serious health threat is required to motivate people to lose weight.

The same could be said for the Western world's love affair with driving alone and spewing out about one pound of carbon emissions per mile driven. It may take a serious global threat for people to drive less and carpool, take public transit, bike, walk or vanpool to work.

Enter "An Inconvenient Truth," the Academy Award-winning documentary presented by Al Gore and released in 2006, which captured the attention of North America and its gluttonous energy consumption.

TDM marketers are quick to piggyback on the latest cultural trends in our attempts to catch the attention of potential mode-shifters. In the 1970s and early 1980s, we used the price of gas and Arab Oil Embargo to convince commuters to leave their cars at home. The personal fitness craze of the 1980s and 1990s lured many people onto bikes and to tie on their walking shoes to get to work.

In the new millennium, with irrefutable evidence and consensus of scientists, global climate change is imminent. This lightning rod, so eloquently and convincingly described by Al Gore, has caught the attention of the masses.

This article will describe several TDM marketing campaigns that incorporated the theme of climate change, and include findings from two researchers

who disagree with the efficacy of green marketing angles to lure people out of their single-occupancy-vehicles. The researchers argue that most people are not motivated by environmental threats, but by their own self-interest.

King County

King County in Washington State, host of the September Association for Commuter Transportation Conference, boasts a multi-faced TDM program, and many effective marketing campaigns, including some focused on climate change.

"I'm working on two specific projects we're trying with the green theme," said Carol Cooper, transportation planner for King County.

The green theme has surged to the head of the pack of marketing ideas since 2006.

"In the last year to year and a half, we've been hearing that concern about the environment is a more powerful motivator than in the past," said Cooper. "When we first started marketing in 2004, we thought the environment would motivate" people to give up driving alone, she said. Previously, King County touted the health benefits of biking or walking to work or walking to the bus stop. When King County first used environmental threats as a reason to take public transit in 2004, the public responded tepidly.

To hone in on the most effective methods to reach commuters, King County held facilitated guided discussions with community leaders and stakeholders, Cooper said. Paid consultants executed an informal type of focus groups to review King County's approach to contact individual neighborhoods in King County in the Seattle metropolitan region. Using feedback gleaned from those sessions, the

agency re-introduced climate change as a theme.

"In the past year to year-and-a-half, we've been hearing global warning is important," and it would make the respondent pay attention, Cooper said.

King County implemented a residential-based outreach using social marketing in 2004. "We spent the first six months coming up with the whole approach for the program," and implemented "In Motion" in May 2004, Cooper said. "The green message has been resonating. It's not all about just green. We've incorporated it" into other marketing campaigns.

This year's campaign, "Green Up Your Commute" focused on commuters to downtown Seattle. It asks people to sign a pledge to carpool, take public transit, bike, walk or vanpool to work.

"We're getting pledges rolling in," Cooper said of the new program. The green-based incentives, such as free compact fluorescent light bulbs, attract interest, "It's not really about what you win," she said.

"There are a lot of people who have been thinking trying to get out of their car. They just need some help. They need a reason," Cooper said. "The reason can be as simple as getting the information," such as a bus schedule, a free ride ticket, the knowledge of a guaranteed ride home, or finding out where the bus stops. Trying something new becomes less threatening when "you make it so easy for them," she said.

At Stanford University in the San Francisco Bay Area, Parking & Transportation (P&TS) incorporated climate change in the school's marketing campaigns to discourage bringing cars



6,188 lbs. of CO₂ not released

Amount of CO₂ a person could keep out of the atmosphere annually, if that person used alternative transportation for a standard 30-mile roundtrip commute instead of driving alone.

every
trip
counts

carpool
bicycle
train
bus
walk
vanpool

Join the Stanford University
Commute Club Today.
<http://transportation.stanford.edu>
(650) 723-9362

Sample advertisement from Stanford University's recent marketing campaign.

to campus. Parking is tight for Stanford's community of 36,000 staff, students and hospital employees.

"We have gone through a number of different phases with the marketing" of transportation alternatives since 2002, said Hamilton, director of parking and transportation services since 2000 and a TDM professional since 1987. Like King County, Stanford promoted the health benefits of biking and walking to work.

"We have a fair number of people who will walk from the train station to work instead of riding our shuttle," said Hamilton. The green theme is one aspect of the school's marketing campaign this year.

Without question, cash seems to be a most powerful motivator for the Stanford community to change its commuting habits, according to data gathered.

In 2002, P&TS created the Commute Club, with membership earned only by turning in a parking pass. Commute Club Members receive \$230, dubbed "Clean

Air Cash." Stanford's staff and students can access the university's guaranteed ride home and ridematching services, and commuting employees receive free commuter rail passes and free passage on specified express buses to and from campus.

The next big jump for Stanford's TDM program also involved a payoff. "When we started offering free rail passes, we had a huge transition," said Hamilton. The rate of drive-alone commuters went from 72 percent in 2002 to 52 percent in 2007. Among those who didn't drive alone, the number of people who took the train went up from 4 percent in 2002 to 17 percent in 2007. Some 6700 people belong to the Commute Club in 2006-2007, up from 3,000 when it began in 2002, Hamilton said.

When P&TS created the Commute Club and identified individual commuters who scooped up the "Clean Air Cash," the next step was to put a face on it. Commuters responded to a call for

stories about what they loved about their alternate commute. P&TS publicized the stories and went a step further by photographing real commuters and publishing the images on posters, postcards, banners and on buses. The goal of the campaign was to communicate the following: "There are people out there [who are driving less] and these people are you," Hamilton said.

The marketing effort became viral – and developed a life of its own, according to Hamilton. Departments within the school approached Hamilton to photograph groups of people who commute by public transit, carpool, biking, walking or vanpooling. Hamilton said he obliged, had their photos taken and added them to the marketing campaign. The marketing approach created a new norm on campus. It became "cool" to appear on a poster to promote a green commute. This pinnacle of social marketing was achieved, in part, by using a green commute as one aspect of a comprehensive approach to discourage driving alone to Stanford.

“People have different things that motivate them. Some people are motivated by cost. Some people are motivated by health. Some people are motivated by the environment. What we try to do is put as many of these things together as possible,” said Hamilton.

Companies are also jumping on the climate change bandwagon to better position themselves in the marketplace, according to Jeremy Holmes, program director of RIDE Solutions in Southwest Virginia. The grant-funded regional ridesharing program is operated by the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission in cooperation with the New River Valley Planning District Commission, funded by grants. RIDE Solutions works with individuals and companies to promote carpooling and other alternatives to driving alone.

“I think this is a fantastic time for TDM. Employers are becoming very aware of their carbon footprint,” Holmes said. The movement is non-partisan, even in Southwest Virginia, a region Holmes describes as conservative. At least five companies have signed up to offer TDM measures to their employees. “I’m hoping this will translate to significant action on their part,” said Holmes. Along with the widespread media exposure on climate change, “Al Gore could probably be credited with driving a lot of that,” he added.

Companies have approached RIDE Solutions because they are interested in reducing their carbon footprint and greenhouse gases, followed by the marketing benefit of being green. Companies believe “the public wants to do business with green companies,” he said. Such behavior makes a statement: “We implement green policies. Our competitors don’t.”

General media messages on TV and radio proved ineffective, Holmes reported. When RIDE Solutions began a campaign to contact companies directly, through chambers of commerce, networking events

and even making cold calls, “That’s where we’ve gotten the biggest impact,” he said.

Another strategy used by the RIDE Solution is giving away bike racks to companies and institutions to initiate collaboration on a broad trip reduction program. For example, by giving away a bike rack, the RIDE Solutions established a relationship with Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital with 3,000 employees, and hundreds of others in its health system in 19 counties, Holmes said.

RIDE Solutions rewards companies that take green initiatives by publicly thanking them in radio ads. The marketing program is still in the early stages, but the initial response has been encouraging, Holmes said. A good tactic for companies to take to go greener is to promote TDM activities, he added.

There’s no consensus among TDM professionals about the efficacy of a green marketing campaign.

In early 2005, Miriam Lydia Sorell researched how to apply social marketing to TDM efforts for a master’s thesis at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She concluded that people value personal convenience over environmental stewardship. She researched consumer responses to three TDM case studies, including the federal initiative, “It All Adds Up to Cleaner Air,” to help local governments and metropolitan planning organizations address air quality issues.

“Campaigns that rely on environmental awareness are unlikely to influence choices because people value their own time and convenience more highly. Campaigns must show people simple modifications they can make to their transportation behaviors that will benefit them,” Sorell said.

While people in the study responded that the cleaner air messages were relevant, the ads didn’t appear motivate people to change their transportation choices. Implying that those who drive alone may contribute to global warming may backfire, Sorell reported.

“Focus groups revealed that ‘greater good’ messages could actually elicit negative reactions from people who were indignant that they were being made to feel personally responsible for such widespread problems as air pollution,” she said in the thesis.

When the research was done in 2005, “people who expressed concerns about the environment were not necessarily receptive” to changing their transportation modes, even though they may have recycled and used compact fluorescent light bulbs, she said.

Paul Minett agrees with Sorell’s conclusion that personal convenience outweighs concern about the greater good. Minett is a New Zealand-based consultant and president and co-founder of Trip Convergence Ltd., which produced www.lessCARSinNEWYORK.com.

Based on research he performed on customer values earlier in his career, Minett abides by the following tenet: “People do what is in their own best interest first. To get them to do what you want them to do, you have to convince them it is in their own best interest.”

Minett endorses incentives to lure people out of single occupancy vehicles. “The more they’re giving up, the more you have to give them” in return, he said. “When it comes to travel behavior, as long it is consistent with their own best interest, they’ll be loyal” to driving alone, Minett said.

He cites the example of a commuter’s worries during her initial bus trip: “I might miss my stop. I might not be able to figure it out. There are so many uncertainties the first time” and for itinerant bus riders, Minett added. Hence, the conclusion drawn is “My best interest is best served by being loyal to my car,” he said.

Carrying the example of brand loyalty to banks, Minett explained, “The reason people don’t switch banks is because it’s perceived as extremely difficult.” People will tolerate incompetent service at banks

because they believe it is hard to change banks and the new bank might not be any better. Hence, consumers often do nothing, which is perceived as inertia. Minett believes otherwise: they are acting in their own self-interest, based on their own filtering systems, norms and values.

If commuters don't perceive the bus as a better alternative to driving alone, they won't change, Minett said.

Sorell's thesis reinforces that concept with this statement, "Social marketing campaigns are most effective when organizations understand the values of the people they are trying to influence, and when they create messages that speak directly to these values."

Marketing campaigns to attract commuters to public transit, carpooling, vanpooling, biking and walking to work must be designed with the commuter's self interest and brand loyalty to their personal cars in mind, Minett said.

For example, when a person buys a Toyota, she or he suddenly notices all of the Toyotas on the road, whereas previously, the consumer had not noticed them. People are only interested in what they want to hear and see. Minett does not believe in educating the public, but instead, emphasized the need to educate marketing professionals to better communicate with consumers and meet their needs.

The goal for TDM professionals is to capture the attention of the target audience by presenting a message – which must be carefully chosen. "They will hear a message when it is consistent with their needs," Minett said. Otherwise, the ad will blend into the cacophony of hundreds of marketing messages we are subjected to daily.

Asking commuters to drastically change their transportation habits is a hard sell according to Sorell. She recommends in her thesis to ask commuters "for smaller more manageable behavior changes, either pertaining to certain types of trip (walk for errands like going to the

post office) or pertaining to specific days ("ride transit for free day" or bike to work on casual Fridays). These small changes may be stepping stones on the way to helping people make larger changes, but despite being small they may be a better target than aiming for a life-altering behavior change, and not getting any results."

No matter what the motivation to change modes, a TDM campaign is "likely to be more effective when they do not just advertise and provide reasons for changing, but make change easier by providing a map, or arranging an incentive like a free ride," Sorell added.

The most effective TDM marketing strategies are discovered by trial and error or via research and focus or feedback groups, such as the input gained by King County. Trying a number of different approaches can entice more commuters under the TDM umbrella.

"It depends on the individual, what motivates him," according to Hamilton. For that reason, Stanford's TDM marketing incorporates a range of

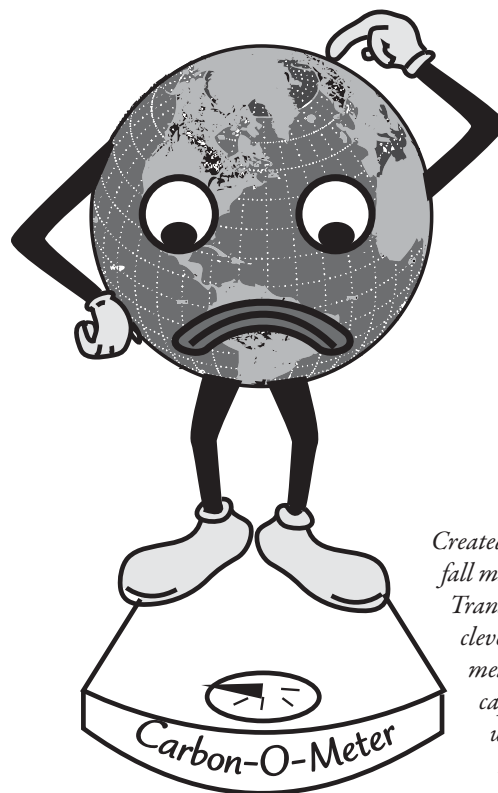
marketing messages from saving money, incentives, prizes, green themes, health benefits, helping the environment, and following the newly established campus social norm of driving less.

"If you don't hook them on one thing, you've got another element," Hamilton said.

Climate change is often on the minds of commuters because of the frequent news stories, studies, books, movies and people speaking out about evidence of pollution impacting the earth's ecosystem. Hamilton reports a number of people in Stanford's Commute Club viewed "An Inconvenient Truth," which motivated them to buy a Prius. "A whole level of awareness has come forward," he said.

Hamilton is not alone in identifying this tipping point, likely spurred by current events and "An Inconvenient Truth." However, the gauntlet must be applied lightly to drive-alone commuters. Start with small, short-term behavior changes and support commuters who experiment with alternative ways to get to work with free bus passes, maps, schedules, and directions to showers at work for bike commuters. Climate change is becoming more obvious, but we must avoid alienating commuters by blaming global warming on their driving alone to work, according to Sorell.

"We're tapping into something that's bigger than us," said Cooper of climate change and research and responses to green marketing efforts in King County, Washington. "Right now seems to be the time to do it. We've seen a shift in awareness and receptivity to that message." **ACT**



Created by a college student and introduced for a fall marketing campaign at the MetroWest/495 Transportation Management Association, this clever graphic makes people think about the double meaning. The TMA director finds the message captures people's attention, but about 5 percent see what they want to see. They approach the TMA table and inquire about low-carbohydrate diets.