



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

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Using Storytelling to Promote Transit

By Caitlin Zibers



Lawrence Transit's website shows photographs of transit riders with snippets from their submitted stories.

Lawrence Transit recently held a storytelling contest to celebrate its 15-year anniversary. Riders were asked to submit their personal stories detailing their experiences using the transit system for the chance to win free fare. Lawrence Transit received 40 stories in all, showing the variety among riders using the system. The contest was both a celebration of the system as well as a way for the riders to engage with system administrators, using storytelling as a way to express what the transit system means to them.

Highlighted stories

Jacob Horton. This 15-year old high school student took first place with his story, highlighting how he was able to navigate Lawrence using the bus. While he was an occasional rider from an early age, it wasn't until sixth grade that he became a regular rider. He lives too close to his school to be eligible to ride the school bus, so he has turned to the city transit system to get to school, extracurricular activities

and errands around town. Along the way he has made new friends and gained confidence in his independence.

Johnny Lyons. Johnny Lyons took second place for his affectionate and quirky salute to the Lawrence Transit system, specifically his bus, "The Five." Johnny rides the bus for his daily commute to work, using the time to people-watch and socialize. He takes particular note of the variety of riders: students from a dozen different countries, nervous newcomers, seasoned riders, the knitting women, book readers, and window gazers.¹ He uses his experiences and observations to fuel his writing, a hobby that he pursues on the weekends, and describes the Lawrence Transit system as a "kaleidoscope of faces and people."²

Billy Baker. Billy's story was written by his cousin, Amanda, and won him third place. Billy uses the transit system every day to get to his job at Cottonwood, a

non-profit agency whose mission is to help people with disabilities shape their own future. Billy's developmental disabilities have limited his transportation options, and his grandparents who care for him rely on the transit system to safely get him from their house to Cottonwood and back every day. Amanda emphasized that the transit system has helped ease his grandmother's mind, knowing that the drivers are always patient and kind with Billy. Without access to the transit system Billy would not be as connected to, and supported by, the Cottonwood community.

Mai Bui. Mai's story highlighted how Lawrence transit was able to help her integrate into a new community. Mai had recently left her home-country of Vietnam and moved to Lawrence with her husband, full of excitement. However, she soon realized that with limited English skills and work experience, the chance of finding a job was nearly impossible. She felt trapped in her small apartment with nowhere to go and nothing to do, isolated and lonely. After a month in Lawrence she rode the bus with her husband, and she had such a positive experience with the friendly driver and riders, she began to feel comfortable riding on her own. She has since branched out and now uses the bus to get around town and visit her conversation practice partner. She said the transit system helps her feel at home in Lawrence; that she is no longer a guest in Lawrence, but a resident.

Using storytelling for the agency

Many transit agencies use testimonials from their riders in marketing; however, testimonials are generally short comments or opinions. Lawrence Transit wanted to do something bigger for their 15th anniversary, which is what led them to hold a story-telling contest. The goal was to show the public why riders use the bus, where they go, and their opinions of the service. The city posted the winning stories on social media.

Each post received about 100 clicks to the city website via the link posted on Facebook or Twitter, said Bob Nugent, general manager of Lawrence Transit. Overall the city was pleased with the outcome, as it not only elevated the system's image, but also reinforced the community's need for transit

service. Personalized, heart-warming stories that illustrated the reasons for service help communicate the need for transit service to those who don't normally ride and may question why the service is needed, Nugent said.

By creating a platform for riders to share their stories, Lawrence Transit received customer feedback, positive marketing, increased traffic to the city website, and reinforced why the community needs this service—all for a relatively low cost. As a bonus, once the contest ended, they were left with a treasure trove of rider stories they plan on highlighting in the future, Nugent said.³

Conclusion

Some communities find it difficult to create and maintain support for transit systems, especially with citizens who do not rely on the service. Lawrence has found success “telling their story” with a unique approach through rider storytelling. To our knowledge no other communities have done this. Engaging with your riders can be incredibly beneficial and relatively easy. Foregoing testimonials for longer, more detailed stories can offer riders the opportunity to speak publicly, and in detail, to the importance of the system. Storytelling is also a fun and engaging way to give your system a voice.

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References

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3. Nugent, Robert. Personal Interview. February 22, 2016.