

# Evaluation of Ridefinders and Central Richmond Association's Transportation and Parking Information Service

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In vibrant cities the demand for parking often exceeds the available supply. Pricing mechanisms are used to balance the demand for off-street parking needs for commuters, clients, and customers. The high cost of parking often makes commuters more receptive to transit and ridesharing alternatives. Reaching the commuter before he or she contemplates his or her parking options provides a marketing opportunity for transit and ridesharing agencies. The commuter may have been forced to reassess his or her parking decision because of new building construction or a rise in out-of-pocket parking costs. It may be a decision of choice, such as changing jobs. Ridefinders and the Central Richmond Association used a marketing technique used by the retail industry to combine the downtown business community's desire for a single source of parking information and the need for ridesharing and transit agencies to reach commuters in the midst of making a commuting mode choice. Retailers frequently discount items to lure customers into the store with the probability that many will purchase other items. Ridefinders offers information on the location and cost of commuter parking to attract commuters with the probability that many will request and use ridesharing and transit information. The effects of the provision of parking information on the frequency of requests for carpool ridematching information and on the enhancement of the image of transit and ridesharing alternatives and providers, as well as the measures used to design and implement the project, are described. It is concluded that such strategies contribute to the increasing demand for ridematching services, enhancing the image, and expanding the exposure of the ridesharing agency's services to commuters.

The city of Richmond's Downtown Plan identified parking as "the most pressing transportation problem facing Downtown." The City Downtown Plan recommends constructing an additional 3,100 new commuter parking spaces to absorb a projected 22,000 or 41 percent more commuters to downtown by the year 2000. However, the Downtown Plan recognizes the importance of applying traffic mitigating solutions to meet the majority of the increased parking demand.

It should be understood, however, that unless the entire program of improvements for all transportation modes recommended [in this plan] is implemented, congestion and parking problems Downtown will be intense and the projected rate of [economic] growth will probably not be attainable.

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Even with a modest increase in parking supply, the city projects a decrease in the number of parking spaces per 100 employees from 53 to 47. The city has also implicitly set objectives for the Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC) and Ridefinders. Transit's share of the commuter market must increase from 20 percent in 1980 to 24 percent by the year 2000. Ridesharing's market share must increase from 27 percent to 34 percent. In other words, GRTC must increase its ridership from 11,000 to 18,000 daily riders to downtown, or by 64 percent. Ridefinders must increase the number of carpoolers and vanpoolers from 13,000 to 23,650 carpoolers to downtown, or by 82 percent. These ambitious objectives call for the use of new measures for penetrating the market. The transportation and parking information center is an example of an innovative measure to meet the needs of commuters and foster consideration of alternatives to driving and parking alone.

The Central Richmond Association (CRA), a not-for-profit organization of 600 businesses dedicated to making the central city a better place to work, shop, live, and visit, conducted a survey of its membership to determine whether such a project was "a wise use of CRA's resources." Of the 52 responses received from the 275 surveys distributed to downtown employers, 92 percent answered affirmatively. The CRA executive director then made two calls to prominent employers and the local match funds were raised.

## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

There were several goals this experimental project was designed to address. The contributing objectives to these goals were established by approximating the impacts such parking information and ridematching services have had independently.

- Develop a central parking information service in response to an employer-identified transportation need.
  - Within 12 months, inventory all commuter parking facilities available to the general public and prepare a map of all those facilities.
  - Concurrently with the development of the map, develop and maintain a current listing of all those parking facilities and their hourly, daily, and monthly rates.
  - Process at least 6,000 requests for the transportation and parking packets by project's end.

- Use the opportunity to provide downtown parking information to promote and facilitate ridesharing and transit alternatives.
  - By the end of the project period, have at least 10 percent of those consumers of parking information also request ridematching assistance.
  - By the end of the project period, place 60 of the parking information consumers into a ridesharing arrangement.
- Improve the image of public transportation.
  - By the end of the project period, improve the parking information consumer's opinion of Ridefinders.
  - By the end of the project period, improve the parking information consumer's opinion of the GRTC.
  - By the end of the project period, improve the parking information consumer's opinion of carpooling.
  - By the end of the project period, improve the parking information consumer's opinion of transit.

## ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

Ridefinders was the primary contact point for commuters, employers, media, and other organizations for parking data. Grant administration, monitoring, and final project design were also Ridefinders' responsibilities. CRA assisted in marketing the program to its members and the media. GRTC provided transit marketing materials and follow-up information to commuters interested in specific transit services.

A previous study prepared by the Richmond Regional Planning District Commission (RRPDC) provided a slightly dated inventory of parking spaces downtown from which to begin. An intern was hired for the first 3 months to prepare a business plan for the service under the close supervision of Ridefinders and CRA's Transportation Committee. A clerk was budgeted to handle and process the calls. Once the project was under way, it was apparent that the primary source of requests would be funneled through employers rather than by phone, and the clerk position was never filled.

## MARKETING STRATEGY

The experiment's strategy applied a common product marketing technique to attract potential new customers. Retail stores typically entice customers into the store by offering items at a steep discount under the probability that many will purchase other items. Ridefinders used a current inventory of commuter parking spaces to attract commuters who were facing a commuting problem (i.e., the lack of convenient, affordable commuter parking spaces) and offered them transit and ridesharing information under the presumption that some will "buy" our products. In short, we were differentiating our products (carpools, vanpools, and public transit) with the costs of commuting and parking alone.

Marketing any service or product requires a well-thought out strategic plan with clearly defined goals and objectives. There are four basic components to the process: product, price, distribution, and promotion.

## Product Strategy

A successful marketing strategy depends on finding and communicating its unique selling proposition. Our unique selling proposition is the single source for information on all commuting options. Each customer would receive the following information for free:

- Map of downtown parking decks open to the public for commuter parking on an hourly, daily, or monthly basis. The cost sheet was updated every 4 to 6 weeks. Generally, less than 10 percent of the lots had any changes during the periods between updates.
  - Price list of all those parking facilities including map reference number; street address or intersection; number of spaces; hourly, daily and monthly rates; whether the facility was a lot or deck; whether it had an attendant on duty; and the operator's name, address, and phone number.
    - Postage-paid ridematching application.
    - Cover letter using a spreadsheet template to estimate the before-tax equivalent of the savings that might accrue to the individual if he or she shared the ride with someone.
    - Postage-paid card for requesting transit service information including schedules and trolley information.
    - Postage-paid card to solicit comments on the product's usefulness to the customer.

Only minor modifications were made to the product. The price list was originally sorted by parking operator. It is now sorted by the map reference number to facilitate use by the commuter. The cover letter was updated to reflect changes in the tax law and allow Ridefinders to customize the information to the customer's income and filing status. Additional consideration is being given to changing this information into tabular form or replacing it with the method used by Hertz to estimate costs.

## Pricing Strategy

Decisions regarding pricing were reached to stimulate commuter interest and, at the same time, ensure that our employer distribution channels had sufficient supply to meet identifiable demands. The decision to make the parking information available to commuters for free was one of the key factors that influenced all other components of the marketing strategy. The design of the product limited our ability to produce enough copies for every employee, visitor, shopper, and tourist. We had to provide some selectivity.

The map had to be large enough to permit every lot with more than 10 spaces to be shown. Various screens were used to distinguish between lots, roads, landmarks, and trolley routes. As a result of these design features, the map did not lend itself to inexpensive reproduction by other parties.

It became readily apparent early on that employers preferred to take a shotgun approach and distribute the packet to every employee regardless of current mode or even the employee's desire to have a map. We intentionally sought to prevent this indiscriminate distribution of the parking packets so as not to encourage current ridesharers or bus riders to change their mode. We would not refuse to provide the park-

ing information to anyone who was ridesharing or riding the bus who requested one. We simply were not going to go out of our way to do so. To discourage employers from using this approach we changed our pricing strategy.

Initially, the parking packets were to be made free to anyone who requested a map. We informed any employer who sought to give every employee a map that we would (a) provide up to five copies free to each organization and sell additional copies at cost (\$1.25 each) or (b) provide every employee who actually requested parking information by completing a survey form or card a free copy.

We provided the employer with an economic incentive for participating in our ridematching surveys without charging the end user (i.e., commuter) anything. The modified pricing policy resulted in employers opting not to give a parking and transportation packet to every employee. However, several employers did buy several for internal use. Although we expected most employers simply to inform employees how to obtain this information by calling Ridefinders, many employers chose to offer the information in conjunction with the transportation audit survey.

Thus, the pricing decision was based on targeting commuters in need, as well as on budgetary concerns.

### Distribution Strategy

Effective marketing requires determining when, where, and from whom the product is to be distributed. Ridefinders already had a cadre of employee transportation coordinators (ETCs) at most downtown employers serving as the primary distribution channel for order taking and delivery of our ridematching product, the matchlist. Orders for the information and completed packets were to flow through our ETC "pipeline." Broader distribution methods, such as displays and magazine racks, were rejected as being too expensive to stock and maintain. Such channels also would not inform us who was entering our store and "buying" our products. By knowing who is using the service we can then follow-up the orders in future marketing efforts.

During the course of the project, Ridefinders was conducting "transportation audits" of several large employers. This audit of employee commuting habits and willingness to pay for various traffic-mitigating solutions to the perceived parking problem offered Ridefinders a method to offer our new "product" to thousands of potential customers. It also enabled us to more directly position our ridematching product as a solution to the "parking problem." By adding the parking packet and ridematching options to the questionnaire distributed to everyone in the downtown work force of several employers, we stretched our marketing budget and increased the incentive for returning the questionnaires for analysis. In general, for every 10 employees returning the questionnaire, 3 requested parking information and 1 requested ridematching assistance.

The cost to mail the packet was high (90 cents) except when large employer batches were mailed together and bulk rates (16 cents each) could be used. Labels were typed on the typewriter rather than the computer. Later, we plan on adding the names of persons who requested only the parking packet to our files for future marketing campaigns.

### Promotion Strategy

Promotional strategies are designed to create awareness of the product or service, pique interest, obtain inquiries, generate use, and foster continuing support as well as use. Ridefinders used public relations, personal selling, and advertising as its promotional methods.

To reach the primary market of downtown commuters who need parking or are interested in decreasing their parking expenses, Ridefinders targeted a secondary market of employers who find the "parking problem" to be a problem for their organization. Ridefinders and CRA met with an ad hoc group of personnel directors of major downtown employers. They expressed a high degree of support for promoting the availability of this new service to their employees on our behalf. With employers expressing a keen interest in the service and agreeing to generate awareness of the new service within their organizations, Ridefinders could focus on obtaining inquiries for ridematching information.

The key to the program's success in fostering inquiries for ridematching information and ultimately as a result of providing this information, initiating new ridesharing arrangements, rested in the ability to personally sell each person who called for the parking map. After obtaining the information necessary to mail the customer the parking map, commuters would also be told they could receive the names of other commuters who live and work nearby and who are interested in sharing the costs of commuting, including parking.

Although personal selling continued to play a major role in obtaining inquiries for ridematching information, too much dependence was placed on employers for generating awareness of the new service. Though many employers did include some mention of the new service, it generally has not been continuously promoted. Electronic mail appeared to be the most innovative method used by employers.

Most of the demand generated for the service was the result of Ridefinders including the availability of this product when conducting transportation audits of employee commuting habits and concerns. Commuters were offered both products (ridematching and parking information) at the same time. Because both products were marketed together through these transportation audits, no personal selling was directed at individuals who requested only the parking information. The inclusion of the ridematching registration form in each parking packet also provided these commuters with another opportunity to request ridematching information once they had the costs of parking in front of them.

Ridefinders supplemented personal selling promotions and employer outreach efforts with broad coverage advertising as well as providing employers a direct-mail method for internal promotions. We posted 11 billboards for a month, ran customized radio ads for 2 weeks, and developed a special payroll insert for employers. Although limited resources were dedicated to each of these methods, we concluded that these media were not targeting the market sufficiently to make them cost-effective. The most cost-effective form of advertising has proven to be the Yellow Pages under the section listing parking operators. This listing accounts for about 4 percent of our requests for ridematching assistance. The \$25/month cost is extremely low relative to its reach.

For the transportation and parking information service, public

relations activities also seemed to provide better promotional value than paid advertising. Local media, in particular, now call Ridefinders when doing stories about parking downtown. These stories, in which another transportation issue is the primary purpose, offer an excellent opportunity to present ridesharing's case. Usually, after a story was aired or an article printed, we could expect a slight surge in demand. More often than not, the press also included our telephone number in the story.

The public relations exposure also contributed to elevating Ridefinders' visibility and the opportunities for growth of services into related areas. As the sole inventory of parking information, Ridefinders has also been asked to assume other projects, such as the administration of a proposed retail parking validation program, the marketing of a proposed parking shuttle bus system, and the administration of a proposed on-street preferential parking program for carpools and vanpools.

It is management's belief that our involvement in this dem-

onstration project had a direct bearing on the consideration by other public and private bodies of additional alternatives to driving alone and of Ridefinders' management capabilities.

## EVALUATION

A sample of 400 users of the services was selected to evaluate how we met our goals and objectives. Demographic data were also collected to determine if there were any factors that could improve the marketing of the service.

The sample was split evenly between persons who only requested the parking information and those who received both a matchlist and a parking information packet. The sample was further stratified based on mode split (Table 1). In other words, the sample's mode split for each group reflected the mode split at the time Ridefinders filled the order. We received 56 completed surveys back for a 14 percent return

TABLE 1 MODE SPLIT BY SERVICES REQUESTED

MODE	MATCHLIST ONLY	MATCHLIST AND MAP	MAP ONLY	NEITHER	TOTAL
BY TYPE OF REQUEST:					
Walk-bike	0.0	0.1	0.8	0.8	0.7
Drive Alone	42.9	46.5	53.0	53.8	52.0
Carpool	37.1	38.1	29.7	27.6	30.1
Bus	17.7	13.8	16.0	17.6	16.5
Vanpool	2.3	1.4	0.5	0.3	0.6
BY MODE:					
Walk-bike	0.0	3.1	37.5	59.4	100.0
Drive Alone	3.0	13.0	32.6	51.4	100.0
Carpool	4.5	18.5	31.5	45.5	100.0
Bus	3.9	12.2	31.0	52.9	100.0
Vanpool	13.8	34.5	27.6	24.1	100.0
ALL RESPONSES:					
Walk-bike	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.4	0.7
Drive Alone	1.6	6.8	16.9	26.7	52.0
Carpool	1.4	5.6	9.5	13.7	30.1
Bus	0.7	2.0	5.1	8.7	16.5
Vanpool	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.6

NOTE: All figures represent percentages obtained through employer surveys (4,763 persons).

rate. This precludes us from having a sufficient level of confidence in the results at the map-only versus the map-and-matchlist level.

As shown in the following list of objectives and results, we were successful in terms of our goals of providing a needed commuter transportation service, offering alternatives to driving alone, and enhancing our image:

- OBJECTIVE: Prepare a map of downtown commuter parking lots. RESULT: Within 4 months, 10,000 copies of the downtown parking map and folder were produced.

- OBJECTIVE: Develop and update an inventory of parking costs. RESULT: Within 4 months, an inventory of 95 parking facilities was developed and computerized, which included costs, parking operator, type of parking facility, number of spaces, and information on whether or not a parking attendant was present.

- OBJECTIVE: 6,000 requests for the transportation and parking information packets. RESULT: Ridefinders received nearly 2,500 individual requests for the packets.

- OBJECTIVE: 10 percent of the requests (or 600 persons) will request ridematching assistance. RESULT: 46 percent of the requests for the parking packets also yielded a ridematching request. Therefore, nearly 1,150 persons requested a matchlist.

- OBJECTIVE: Place 60 persons into a ridesharing arrangement. RESULT: Applying Ridefinders' FY 1987 direct placement rate of 13 percent, we estimate approximately 150 persons formed or joined a carpool.

- OBJECTIVE: Develop a more favorable image of Ridefinders. RESULT: The consumer's opinion of Ridefinders improved for 67 percent of the customers.

- OBJECTIVE: Develop a more favorable image of carpooling. RESULT: The consumer's opinion of carpooling improved for 42 percent of the customers.

- OBJECTIVE: Develop a more favorable image of the Greater Richmond Transit Company. RESULT: The opinion of GRTC improved for 20 percent of the customers.

- OBJECTIVE: Develop a more favorable image of transit. RESULT: The opinion of transit improved for 20 percent of the customers.

In addition to the stated goals and objectives, there are several observations that should be made to persons considering such a project. One of the first questions usually asked of Ridefinders is, Why is a ridesharing program providing parking information? Our position has been that transit and ridesharing alternatives have more to gain when placed in comparison to the high cost of parking. It also offers us the opportunity to expose others to our services who would be generally reluctant to apply for ridematching information on their own.

An indication that our premise was correct can be found in what people remember receiving and what action they took after obtaining the information (Figure 1). While the parking map was the prominent piece and the most remembered product, it is interesting to note that the carpool matching application was the second most remembered product, ahead of the parking price list. While 82 percent of the commuters remembered receiving a map showing downtown parking,

nearly 68 percent of the commuters remembered receiving a carpool matching application.

Building product recognition is only part of our objective. What the commuter chooses to do with the information is our primary concern. Most people saved the information for future use, but more people used the opportunity to ask for a matchlist or call for transit information than found monthly parking.

Just who used our service is also important to the evaluation of the project. Demographically, the user profile indicates that we are penetrating new markets. While the vast majority (estimated at 75 percent) of the commuters who use Ridefinder's ridematching service are women, there is a fifty-fifty split when parking information is also offered. Another study currently under way will provide us with information on the age, occupation, household size, and vehicle availability data that will enable us to compare this service in more depth with our ridematching data base profile. Figure 1 shows a demographic breakdown of those persons who returned the survey questionnaire.

Finally, no evaluation is complete without a discussion of costs. This project cost less than 60 percent of the budgeted amount. Some of this saving is attributable to lower-than-anticipated demand. However, a significant cost savings was achieved through the use of existing employer distribution channels and a prudent pricing strategy. All labor-related costs associated with this project except for the intern hired to collect the data and draft the business plan were excluded from the costs contained in Table 2. Some items such as the ridematching application and the transit brochure were not billed against this project.

A breakdown of printing and advertising costs follows:

<i>Printing and Advertising</i>	<i>Costs (\$)</i>
Creative items/functions including copy, layouts, illustrations, type, stats, mechanical art, production, and supervision	3,911.69
Printing of 10,000 two-color folders, with additional pocket flaps	3,315.30
Printing of 10,000 maps, four-color with bleed, including additional negative stripping for color separations by printer	4,771.71
Advertising, including 1 week radio, 11 billboard months, and other	4,122.47
Total	16,121.17

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The project has achieved most of its objectives and yielded several additional benefits to the organization.

- The project should be continued and promotion should be focused through employers rather than the general public.

- Low-cost advertising such as the Yellow Pages will provide sufficient coverage for long-term promotional efforts.

- Employers are willing to pay for the product but methods to reduce unit costs should be explored.

- Well-produced materials promote a professional image that can enhance the organization's exposure.

- Market the availability of parking information to employers when soliciting their participation in ridematching surveys.

PROFILE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

1. Current mode:

29 Driving alone  
 20 Carpool  
 6 Bus  
 0 Other

2. Materials remembered receiving:

46 Map of downtown  
 26 Price list of downtown parking  
 38 Carpool matching application  
 14 Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC) information  
 11 Estimate of your commuting costs  
 1 Other

3. How the information was used:

16 Found monthly parking.  
 17 Requested the names of potential carpool partners.  
 6 Contacted the bus company for route information.  
 7 Shared the information with someone else.  
 31 Saved the information for future reference.  
 11 Discarded the information.  
 2 Did not receive any information.  
 1 Do not remember.

4. How the information affected the commuter's opinion of:

	IMPROVED	NO CHANGE	WORSENERD
Ridefinders	33	16	0
Central Richmond Association	3	36	0
Greater Richmond Transit Company	8	32	0
Parking lot operators	2	31	7
Carpooling	20	24	0
Bus service	8	30	1
Parking costs	5	16	21
Parking availability	15	15	15
Public sector's attitude about parking	2	33	6
My employer's attitude about parking	0	37	4

5. Demographics of survey respondents:

Sex	28	Male	28	Female
Age	0	Under 18	4	45 to 49
	2	19 to 24	1	50 to 54
	26	25 to 34	5	55 to 64
	17	35 to 44	1	65 and over
Race	6	Black	46	White
Occupation	33	Professional or Managerial	0	Sales
	20	Administrative or Clerical	2	Production or repair
Number of Employed Persons over 16	4	None	7	3 persons
	12	1 person	1	4 persons
	32	2 persons	0	5 or more persons
Number of Motor Vehicles Per Household	0	None	12	3 vehicles
	8	1 vehicle	2	4 vehicles
	29	2 vehicles	5	5 or more vehicles
Total Annual Household Income	0	Under \$10,000	10	\$25,000-\$34,999
	0	\$10,000-\$14,999	15	\$35,000-\$49,999
	4	\$15,000-\$24,999	27	\$50,000 and over

FIGURE 1 Profile of survey respondents.

TABLE 2 PROJECT COSTS VERSUS BUDGET

Description	Budget	Actual	Balance	%
Salaries & Wages	\$4,144.00	\$2,997.50	\$1,146.50	72.3%
Fringes	\$368.00	\$178.59	\$189.41	48.5%
Printing and Advertising	\$24,500.00	\$16,121.17	\$8,378.83	65.8%
Telephone	\$250.00	\$0.00	\$250.00	0.0%
Postage	\$5,249.58	\$1,650.42	\$3,599.16	31.4%
Reproduction	\$5,000.00	\$1,449.49	\$3,550.51	29.0%
Revenue	(\$200.00)	(\$125.35)	(\$74.65)	62.7%
TOTAL	\$39,311.58	\$22,271.82	\$17,039.76	56.7%

- Communications channels within employers' organizations need to be targeted as well as the ETC. Internal electronic bulletin boards through computers may be worth promoting further.

- Consider using the parking information as a revenue-producing service.

- The cooperation of parking operators was good. They receive free marketing of their lots and decks in addition to the data necessary to evaluate market conditions in exchange for keeping Ridefinders' parking information up-to-date.

- With the enhancement of the organization's image often come requests for the management and administration of other transportation services, many of which are unrelated to the commuter market. Caution should be exercised in selecting which, if any, of these potential new services are within the organization's goals.

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