

Many theories have been expounded, from both theoretical and practical viewpoints, about the elements that create and maintain a successful vanpool operation. An added piece of information follows in the form of a first-person account by an experienced vanpool driver and a member of the TRB staff. -- Editor

What is the secret of maintaining stable ridership in a vanpool? Finding 11-14 people who are compatible, cooperative, congenial, thoughtful, respectful, and accommodating and whose residences and working places are convenient for expedient travel are among the problems that face vanpool coordinators. Commuting costs, service, reliability, comfort, and convenience are significant factors on which potential riders will base their decision to join a vanpool, and they are also the conditions on which a rider will base his or her decision to remain in a vanpool. Eliminate or not provide any one of them and there is discontent.

Commuting Costs

Any vanpool driver-coordinator whose primary purpose for operating a vanpool is to make lots of money may find that his or her riders, if any, resent this greed, and they may soon consider other equally costly or more costly means of transportation. Costs should be revealed to members of the vanpool if the driver's personal business is not involved. Availability of the operating costs, methods of calculation for charges, and whatever else can be revealed should be made available and discussed if questions of this nature should arise. The purpose of the "open-book" tactic is to bring every member into the driver's confidence; at the same time, the driver gains the confidence of every member. The driver may also wish the riders to participate in decisions such as route changes, alternate routes, pickup times, and parking-location alternatives. The more the riders are involved in the decisions affecting their lives, the more they will feel a part of the operation and will want to remain. Escalating costs require occasional adjustments in fares. These increases are more readily accepted if the riders have been kept informed of the costs of operation.

Once ridership is established, its stability will not falter even when long absences due to business trips, illness, or vacations interrupt schedules if an equitable means is established for reimbursement of prepaid fees or guarantee of a seat upon return when fees are paid after the fact. This latter condition is harder to live with, especially when a given sum is needed for a payment for purchase or lease of a van. Therefore, the following pertains to prepaid (preferably monthly) fees.

Care and Feeding of Vanpoolers:

A Driver's Viewpoint

Louis M. MacGregor

A driver-coordinator soon becomes a bookkeeper, and it is no small task. Records of vacations; days, mornings, or evenings off; business trips; and infrequent alterations in pickups, routes, etc., must be kept daily. On the basis of these records, substitutes can fill in, and the fee collected from them is dispersed among the absentee riders. The driver will spend only a little time contacting substitutes if a list is maintained. Riders will suggest people and may even provide their own substitutes when absent, in which case the substitute reimburses the rider directly, or the driver will see that the regular rider receives all of the substitute's fee regardless of other absentees and substitutes. Accurate records are necessary to assure that the rider gets his or her fee and that the driver doesn't come up short. There are other means of dispersing substitute fees, all of which require less bookkeeping, but my feeling is that the method described provides credibility for the driver, thereby contributing to stability in ridership.

Service

Service is nearly synonymous with "catering," and that's what a vanpool driver-coordinator does to an extent. If the driver unilaterally decides to pick up and drop off only on main arterials or at a parking lot, he or she has reduced service if the members had not agreed with the decision. On the other hand, if the ridership arrived at

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this arrangement democratically as an expedient means of vanpooling, the arrangement is then an increase in service. As mentioned previously, the riders should be included in the decision-making process. Their wisdom is uncanny at times.

Reliability

You may provide the best service in the world (door-to-door service, for instance), but if you show up one-half hour late two days out of five, or your van breaks down once a week, you are not reliable.

Comfort

Vans are trucks, and anyone who expects a Cadillac shouldn't be enlisted into the ridership. Nevertheless, a new, or relatively new, van is bright, cheery, and spacious and has good visibility for all. Brush it out or damp-mop the mats once a week, keep the windows clean, and wash it when needed. Just as important is the driver's ability to provide a smooth drive. Jerky starts and stops, two-wheel cornering, and fearsome following of the vehicle in front all contribute to the discomfort of the riders. A driver must subdue any natural instincts to "show that guy" or "teach him a thing or two." The driver must be courteous and defensive, something many of us are not in our own cars. In addition, agreement should be made beforehand in respect to radio playing and smoking, both of which bother many people.

Convenience

Whether the vanpool provides door-to-door or parking lot-to-parking lot service, it must be what the riders want. If they want it, it is convenient, at least on a relative scale. More convenience and more service are easily provided, but at a cost. Cost does not affect reliability and comfort. These latter two are mostly controlled by the person of the driver, and money doesn't alter that aspect of his or her nature and/or ability.

Sometime in the future, the competition to obtain and retain riders will become highly competitive in certain areas, for example, Reston, Virginia, and Columbia, Maryland. When that competition becomes keen, a driver-coordinator may need to consider some aspects of his or her operation that need adjustments or a cleaning up. More of the human factors will need to be considered in maintaining a quality service. I believe some of the observations I've made, basic as they are, cannot be ignored when evaluating existing individual vanpools. Some of these vanpools will continue to exist for years because the people in the vanpool were considered significant factors and more important than the institution of vanpools itself.

The foregoing are my impressions and conclusions drawn from experience as a vanpool driver-coordinator. After four months, I still have the same 11 passengers I started out with. I am proud of that and take some credit for it. However, I believe I was lucky; each of my passengers has all the attributes I mentioned in the first paragraph, and it is primarily because of this that we are still together.