Case study: marketing partnerships

Baltimore and Boston
Transit partners with agencies and cities to provide communication tools, rider support, feedback on data feeds, information about usage patterns, and more – at no cost to the agency. In exchange, Transit asks for endorsement and heavy promotion from city and agency partners. This case study describes the impacts of these partnerships on the customer experience in Baltimore and Boston.

Transit has almost 60 agency and city partners. Across North America, a new user downloads the app every four seconds. Of the millions of people who use Transit, one-third are in a city that has a partnership with us.
Background: Baltimore

Maryland Department of Transportation’s Maryland Transit Authority (MDOT MTA) runs the bus, subway, and light rail system serving the Baltimore metropolitan area. With over 100 million riders annually, MDOT MTA is one of the top 15 agencies in the US by ridership. High-quality service and the real-time information that allows people access to that service is particularly important in Baltimore, because more than half of city residents do not have access to a car.

In 2016, before the partnership launched, 55,000 MDOT MTA riders were using Transit each month. Baltimore had real-time information for its lines, the predictions were not as accurate as they could be. The agency-built web-based solution was infrequently updated and hard to use on a smartphone.

In 2017, MDOT MTA partnered with Swiftly to provide better predictions to its customers, and the following year chose Transit as its officially endorsed app for real-time passenger information and journey planning. The agency wrapped several buses and performed a large digital media campaign to advertise the app to its riders. Today, MDOT MTA can reach its passengers in real time, with over a quarter of riders opening Transit on an average weekday, and over 150,000 using the app every month.
Our partnership with Transit enhances our BaltimoreLink system by providing the best real-time transit experience for our riders. With pinpoint scheduling accuracy at their fingertips, riders won’t have to leave their workplace or home early to wait for the bus. This enhanced feature truly will transform the bus-riding experience for our customers enabling them to better manage their daily schedules.

Kevin Quinn  
MDOT MTA Administrator
Background:
Boston

The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, known as the MBTA or the T, averages 1.3 million riders per weekday in the Boston metropolitan area. The T was one of the first U.S. agencies to provide third-party developers with open data in GTFS format. It also helped develop GTFS real-time to provide riders with real-time vehicle locations and created a powerful service alerts tool. While other agencies at the time were building their own in-house apps, or sending cease-and-desist letters to third party applications, the T was facing a different problem.

Although it was ahead of the curve in embracing technology, the T website listed a plethora of third-party apps that riders could use, leaving passengers confused about which one to choose. At the end of 2016, Transit won a competitive bid to become the MBTA’s official endorsed app partner, due to our popularity with Boston-area users, our features (including access to ridehail, bikeshare, and commuter rail information), and our willingness to work with the MBTA on future product decisions. Today, more than 170,000 riders use Transit every month in Greater Boston.
Transit app’s nearby departure times, push notifications for alerts, and step-by-step directions make it incredibly user-friendly. It greatly improves the customer experience.

Brian Shortsleeve
former MBTA General Manager
The challenges

In Baltimore, MDOT MTA had been struggling to keep its riders up to date on both everyday needs such as real-time bus locations, and larger challenges, such as effectively communicating service changes. The agency had developed an in-house, web-based solution that required users to know their bus stop number in order to find real-time information. Transit quickly integrated data from this real-time feed into the app and immediately went from 20,000 users a month to 55,000, without any marketing or partnership agreements in place.

However, MDOT MTA was still struggling to reach a large portion of its 170,000 daily riders, and felt it needed a deeper relationship with a trip planning and real-time information provider in order to increase rider satisfaction and enhance communication between the agency and riders.

In Boston, the T pointed passengers to more than 25 apps on its website in 2016. Riders often needed to try out four or five before finding one that suited their needs. The MBTA was concerned that with so many choices of varying quality, the agency couldn’t communicate effectively with riders. The agency also wanted to gather insights across a large group of users to make better service planning decisions.
Agencies in Boston and Baltimore had two goals: to communicate more effectively with their riders, and to gather information about how riders were using their system. They also realized that their expertise was in operating a transit system, not in building and updating a best-in-class, customer-facing mobile app.

The agencies partnered with Transit to help with both these goals.

By partnering with Transit, MDOT MTA and the MBTA got all of the upsides of having their own app (local branding and customizations, service alerts and in-app banners, origin/destination data, and a day-to-day dashboard) without having to manage a slow and expensive development process, tech support, GTFS troubleshooting or app maintenance. Today, they get the best app on the market, for free. In turn, Transit attracts more users, thanks to the agency endorsements.
Transit agencies in Baltimore and Boston, along with other cities like St. Louis, Calgary, Salt Lake City, and Montreal, have endorsed Transit in lieu of their own proprietary apps and above other third-party offerings, while still providing open data to enable an ecosystem of app options. As a result, the agencies can focus on what they do best: pioneering bold, innovative, transit service on the ground, while offloading mobile design, development, and tech support to Transit. This way, riders can quickly find the best app on the market, and one with which the agency has a direct line of communication. The result: more people accessing real-time data, reducing friction between transit riders and agencies.

Transit’s millions of users in the U.S. and Canada, including existing users from the Baltimore-Washington and Boston areas, as well as visitors who already have Transit on their phones, can now easily see transit information without downloading a new app. And Transit’s existing payment integrations with bikeshare, ridehail, and scooter services in other cities leaves agencies in Baltimore and Boston well-positioned to offer broader capabilities to their riders over time.
Quite frankly, as a Baltimore resident who moved away 14 years ago and has since returned, the Transit app is the best thing to happen to Baltimore’s mass transit system.

Email from MDOT MTA rider
April 2019

Results: Baltimore

After partnering with MDOT MTA in Baltimore, Transit saw a 35% increase in users in the city over the course of the next year. Now one in three MTA riders checks the app each day. In the 12 months ending September 2019, users have opened the app over 130 million times in the MDOT MTA service area.

Transit adoption rate in Baltimore

Adoption is measured by comparing the average daily number of Transit users with ridership statistics from the National Transit Database.

Despite heavy usage, customer contact volume has decreased. Transit receives an average of four requests for assistance each week from MDOT MTA riders, who consistently provide feedback to make the app better for Baltimore, and to praise the relationship between Transit and MDOT MTA.
Results: Boston

In Boston, the increase in adoption by MBTA riders also been pronounced since launching the partnership. In August 2016, Transit had 11,000 daily active users in Greater Boston. The MBTA announced the partnership that September, and by December 2016, the number of Transit users in the MBTA service area had grown to 15,000, jumping 35% in less than three months. After one year, daily users had doubled, and now one in 9 MBTA riders are checking Transit every day for information from the agency. With 175,000 unique riders using Transit each month and almost 50,000 users subscribed to receive service alerts for their favourite lines, the MBTA can communicate quickly and easily with its riders about service changes.

The MBTA had already analyzed data from its fare collection system to understand rider behaviour. As it sought to improve service, the agency was interested in going beyond this data to get a better sense of how riders were using the system. Transit shared anonymized information on Boston-area app opens and locations, trip planner origins and destinations, and other datasets to help the MBTA plan better service. The T partnered with Northeastern University’s Boston Area Research Initiative to identify key lessons that can be integrated into its service planning.

Email from MBTA rider
August 2019

I recently got rid of my car, and adjusting to life in Boston without it has been a little rocky. That was until I happened to find your app which is endorsed officially by the MBTA… Since downloading it I have been able to get to work, go out, and live a fuller life without the need for a car. So kudos to you guys for helping me with the transition.

We’re always looking for ways to better understand how our customers use the system. We’ve endorsed the Transit app as the best way for customers to plan their trips, and the opportunity to better understand how our customers get to their homes and jobs and loved ones through analyzing Transit’s data will give us a unique perspective when we consider service issues and future projects.

Jeff Gonneville
MBTA Deputy General Manager
All Transit partners have access to a data dashboard that provides a quick, high-level summary of key metrics that assess the health of the partnership and how many riders are benefiting from real-time information and trip planning in the app.

With continuous marketing and collaboration to improve data available for riders, MDOT MTA and the MBTA are continuing to develop their relationships with Transit, as it becomes an even better platform to share information and learn from riders. Both agencies have saved hundreds of thousands of dollars on the costs of building and maintaining their own apps, reduced the number of customer support requests coming in from riders seeking information, and enhanced the rider experience through a partnership with Transit.
Let’s go together
transitapp.com/partners