



Increase Vanpooling Awareness and Opportunities

Pilot study conducted in New York's Capital District

Research Objective

The purpose of this pilot was to develop strategies to support employee vanpooling programs across private sector businesses in the Capital District of New York State.

Background

VPSI, a private vanpool service provider, introduced a commuting program in the summer of 2009, targeting businesses in the Capital District. Vanpooling has many benefits, including saving fuel, money, and energy while reducing traffic and pollution. Despite these benefits, VPSI's program was met with resistance or lack of response.



Behavioral Approach: Audience Research, Social Norms, and Omega Strategies

Building an effective program requires research to determine what inhibits individuals from taking a desired action, as well as what motivates them to act. Programs can then be designed that remove the barriers and enhance benefits. In addition, it has been well established that people often change their behavior to align with what is perceived as the norm or most common behavior.^{1,2} Establishing a desired behavior as a social norm is often key to motivating action. Omega strategies are subtle techniques to avert, remove, or redirect resistance to persuasion. One strategy is to minimize the request, where initial contact implies small incremental changes rather than one large overhaul. These strategies attempt to persuade by decreasing one's tendency to avoid certain situations and remove reluctance to change.³

Pilot Description

The NYSERDA consultant, Action Research, conducted a survey to identify employer willingness to support vanpool activities (i.e., distributing information to employees, meeting with representatives, and hosting events). The survey assessed commuter habits, company infrastructure, and general business organization as well as perceived organizational barriers and benefits to introducing the program.

The survey was administered to 73 individuals in corporate management positions at 40 different private sector companies. A total of 18 people responded, representing a range of businesses including health care, child and family services, higher education, insurance, engineering, construction, consulting, and a utility. The majority of respondents had been working for their organization for more than a decade and approximately one-third were in human resources. Once collected, the survey results were analyzed for trends in order to make informed recommendations for effectively marketing the program.

Survey Findings

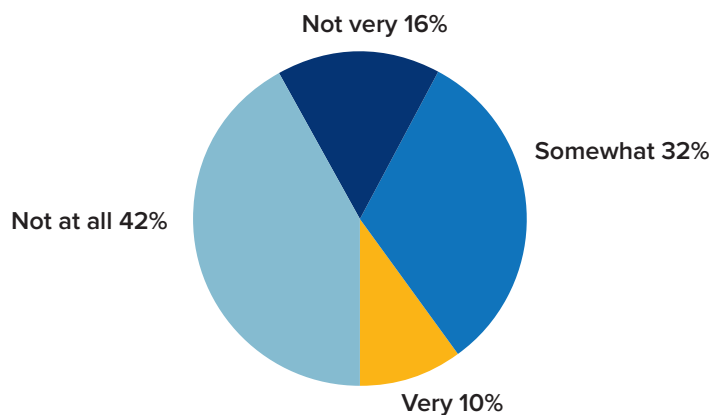
Most employees reported commuting individually by car, followed by public transportation or carpooling, and very few had any knowledge of vanpool programs. Nearly all employees who used alternative transportation did not have access to priority or company parking. Additionally, most employers reported they did not currently offer pretax Flexible Spending Accounts or other programs to help offset mass-transit and commuter expenses.

When asked about their willingness to support vanpool activities, employers were most agreeable to providing information about pretax programs. They were also open to distributing general program information to employees via email and brochures. Employers were least inclined to meet with a vanpool representative or host a demo event.

By far, the greatest barrier was the perception that vanpooling would not be successful, especially for smaller companies (<500 employees). Moreover, approximately half of the responses noted schedule constraints as an important factor, followed by a concern about legal liability.

The greatest benefit to employers was the opportunity to develop a reputation as a green business. The majority rated going green as significantly more influential than improving social connectedness or reducing parking and traffic demands. Fuel-cost savings for employees was rated as the second highest benefit.

Figure 1: How knowledgeable are you about vanpooling?



Visit NYSERDA's Behavior Research page nyserdera.ny.gov/behavior-research for more information.

Recommendations and Results

Action Research provided recommendations to VPSI based on the survey results and employing social norms and Omega strategies. First, VPSI replaced the generic brochure photographs with images of local participants to send a clear message that many people in the Capital District are successfully using vanpools (social norms). Second, VPSI used communication channels that were personally relevant to the target audience, such as brochures, websites, and face-to-face visits, as opposed to more costly radio advertisements. More relevant communication channels engage the individual and increase the likelihood of thorough consideration, which is important for a decision that requires a change to one's routine. Third, VPSI was encouraged to provide brochures or emails to employers to forward to their workers as most employers had expressed willingness to distribute information. Finally, marketing materials were designed to portray vanpooling as an opportunity to become environmentally responsible, as employers were most motivated by this benefit.

Between April 2010 and January 2011, VPSI integrated the recommendations and the number of vanpools grew from four to 14—an impressive growth during a time when fuel prices were relatively stable.

Next Steps

Education about vanpooling is clearly needed to increase awareness and visibility of existing programs. Beyond continuing to implement the recommendations, VPSI and other vanpooling companies could consider developing short case studies on successful programs. Case studies could help counter the notion that vanpools will fail, while demonstrating their effectiveness and addressing how to overcome concerns. Case studies could also publicize that employers can provide access to pretax programs for transportation, which would appeal to employees.

References

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- Schultz, P.W., Khazian, A.M., and Zaleski, A.C. (2008) Using normative social influence to promote conservation among hotel guests. *Social Influence* 3(1), 2-23.
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