



Group 2: Between 4 million and 20 million annual passenger trips

Category 2: Best Marketing and Communications to Increase Ridership or Sales – Comprehensive Campaign

Route 19

A 2018 agreement between The Rapid, the City of Grand Rapids and Spectrum Health to fund access to public transportation represents a first-of-its-kind public-private partnership in The Rapid's 55-year history. The three-year pilot program provides a new, fare-free route along one of Grand Rapids' busiest traffic corridors and creates the opportunity of public transit for new riders. The Rapid developed an integrated communications campaign that significantly surpassed program objectives with a results-driven plan and awareness push that included target audience research, strong public relations and news media outreach, innovative grassroots event planning, tactical social media engagement and strategic marketing.

1. Who was the target audience for this entry?

This campaign was intended to reach potential new riders in an area surrounding the new, upgraded service line along the Michigan Street Corridor. We also partnered with businesses along the route to entice people to get out and use the new free service on their lunch break and while attending client meetings downtown or running errands. An awareness and education outreach effort, for example, encourages Spectrum Health staff to use The Rapid to travel between offices and the medical center for meetings versus driving personal vehicles.

2. What was the situation/challenge that necessitated creating this entry?

Grand Rapids traffic safety reports show that even with four lanes in each direction, the Michigan Street path can move about 4,000 cars per day – a volume of traffic that is routinely exceeded at certain times of the day and occasionally poses hazards to emergency vehicle drivers' ability get through the corridor due to gridlock and congestion. Projected development by 2035 predicts the corridor will have 15,000 daytime employees arriving and then leaving over two peak hours in addition to the creation of up to 10,000 new residential units. The previous Route 19 had extremely limited usage, serving less than 60 people per day. Parking is also exceedingly scarce along this route, which contains several major hospitals, educational institutions, new multi-unit apartments, bustling retail stores and more.

3. What was the strategy/objective of this entry?

Grand Rapids is part of a national trend of businesses increasingly drawn to downtown environments where they can attract young talent. The Route 19 improvements are part of Grand Rapids' broad strategy to alleviate parking and traffic congestion as more businesses and workers locate downtown. The Rapid recognizes that as the Grand Rapids community grows, it's vital for city planning and transit systems to adapt to the changing needs of users, including city residents and downtown-area employees. The Rapid identified two Route 19 campaign objectives:

- **Increase ridership along Route 19** by offering free travel throughout downtown Grand Rapids without the hassle of parking, and promoting the convenience of buses coming every 10 minutes on Michigan Street during peak afternoon and evening travel demand.
- **Introduce The Rapid's new CEO, Andrew Johnson**, to the community in a positive setting through a highly publicized Route 19 news conference launch that included Grand Rapids' popular mayor, elected officials and business and civic leaders.

4. What results/impact did this entry have? (e.g. increased ridership, higher sales, greater public awareness, etc.)

Prior to the new Route 19 launch, the service ranked as The Rapid's lowest-performing line and was on the verge of elimination. After the kickoff, the fare-free Route 19 line has become The Rapids' sixth best-performing route. Initial estimates anticipated ridership could grow to 600-800 daily riders; The Rapid has far exceeded that forecast. Route 19 now averages 1,169 passengers per day after the service change (through Nov. 12). This average total is up from 53 passengers daily prior to the increase, a 2,200 percent increase in ridership.

In addition, the overwhelmingly positive media coverage from the Route 19 press event included statements of support for Johnson's fresh vision and leadership from many of Grand Rapids' key business, civic and government influencers.

5. Please tell the judges why this entry was submitted and why it should win an AdWheel Award.

The new Route 19 service is inspiring people who have never previously considered public transportation to ride The Rapid and is increasingly building acceptance of transit as a viable alternative for getting around Grand Rapids easily and efficiently. During the kickoff news conference that produced statewide headlines, Grand Rapids City Commissioner Joe Jones touted the partnership: "This historic agreement will help create jobs and provide reliable transportation for both workers and people who live along the route. It's a major step forward in improving the quality of life in Grand Rapids."

Equally important, The Rapid successfully highlighted public-private partnerships as a model to spur consideration of additional employer-local government-transit alliances. Discussions are already underway with at least two major Greater Grand Rapids employers for potential new fare-free routes in 2019.