



Making Sense of Transit Mobile Solutions



Executive Summary

The idea of mobile presence is no longer optional, no longer a luxury add-on for reaching and satisfying consumers. Anything lacking mobile access is quickly dismissed as outdated or irrelevant by an increasingly tech-intuitive population. The token effort by many transit agencies to “check the box” on mobile apps with a rider-focused product has caused them to miss out on the many benefits a mobile app can provide an agency, making it a win-win for their riders and for them.

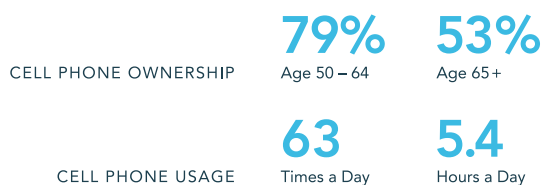
A mobile app offers agencies real estate in the rider’s world, going with them everywhere, and can create a gold mine of relevant data. Choosing the right mobile solution is critical to accessing this data to drastically improve an agency’s workflow by eliminating guesswork and illustrating transportation demand.



Introduction

A quick glance around is enough to confirm we are indeed living in a mobile world. We interact with our physical environment through the filter of our mobile interaction—consulting Yelp to decide what to order at a restaurant has replaced a conversation with the waiter or bartender, enjoying an event first-hand is supplanted by the desire to live-tweet it.

We are, definitively, a smartphone-saturated culture. According to Pew Research Center, 81% of mobile phone users in the U.S. have a smartphone. This growth encompasses all age groups and demographics. Smartphone ownership among those 50–64 is 79% where those 65+ is 53%, indicating that what was once reasonably considered a perk or only for the most tech-savvy of audiences is now an expectation, full stop.



Not only do the majority of Americans have smartphones, we are on them constantly. Checking our phones up to 63 times a day averaging 5.4 hours of screen time.

Even as agencies begin to meet the demand and expectation with a mobile app, the apps continue to be seen as a rider amenity with little value to the agency. This one-dimensional view of mobile apps often means prioritizing speed over both form and function in order to get it done, or simply creating a static display of agency information while missing the best part of mobile.

Not only does a mobile app have the opportunity to convey an agency's identity, brand, and personality, but the right mobile app gives them a chance to interact with their riders in a positive and proactive environment. Agencies can not only give riders real-time updates, but they have a direct line of communication with riders to deliver general announcements and alerts specific to that rider. Social media provides individuals the opportunity to express their opinions instantaneously and these opinions can transcend across public perceptions.

"By consistently engaging with customers, transportation providers can leverage social media to help remove some of the ambiguity around public transportation and create an environment that values input and collaboration from its riders." — Ecolane

Much can be learned by listening to riders through a mobile app as well—agencies can learn the behavior, sentiment and preferences of their riders and know what changes are most desired across the spectrum, not just the proverbial squeaky wheels.



Benefits of Mobile Applications in Transit

There are several options for agencies to create a mobile app, with pros and cons to each.

Custom = Agencies with significant development resources can opt for a custom app specific to their agency and audience.

The benefit to this is full control of brand and component selection, although this sometimes results in apps that try to do too much and lack focus or usability. Cost is a major drawback, however; development costs can be very high and any issues or overruns are billed to the customer. In addition there is an ongoing cost to maintain the app and retain compatibility with new technology or devices, diverting resources from the agency's core mission.

App Garage = The other end of the spectrum is an app garage, where an agency shares its API and/or GTFS feed with the public and invites developers to submit apps they have designed for inclusion on their website.

Benefits include low development costs and outside-the-box applications, but not insignificant is the lack of identity, control or ongoing support that leave many agencies and riders alike frustrated. Opening data to the public may also be an issue for some agencies with security concerns.

Third-Party = Contracting with a company that produces transit apps full-time offers a balance between development costs, customer support, and quality.

A professional mobile app should offer a continually-updated, first-rate user interface, a responsive support team for onboarding and troubleshooting, as well as opportunities for agencies and riders to interact. This reduces the burden on agencies and strengthens brand identity while giving users a great experience and letting them know their voices are heard. The tradeoff is a loss of control at the agency level, a factor somewhat mitigated by the ability to see a final product that has been implemented and proven by others.

The real value potential for mobile applications is having that real estate in the rider's world, presenting data as a window for agencies to view their system in ways previously impossible and unimaginable. With mobile app-based data, agencies can go beyond on-board metrics like boardings and alightings to understand where riders are coming from to catch the bus and where they want to go. Those on-board metrics become significantly more valuable paired with a user context, linking a boarding and alighting to create a complete trip with overall system implications.

Mobile data is also able to expand upon the limited scope of current survey data, without any effort from the user. Not only can a transit trip be understood in the context of a larger journey, but mobile data is by nature current and cumulative. Filtering trip data by time more accurately assesses the health of a route, illustrating the need to create a new route, offer an express or BRT option, or just employ an information campaign to help riders better understand existing options. It can justify changes to stops and routes or weekend service, or show gaps in the transit network that prevent people from taking the bus.

The range and value of data available through mobile interaction today far outpaces that produced by any of the previous methods. This trove of data is deeper, fuller, more accurate and more actionable than the currently utilized guesswork, while saving agencies the time and expense manual collection requires.

In addition, the ability to share those insights in a tangible way has the power to change conversations with city officials and residents with regards to transit infrastructure or resource allocation.

Benefits to Agencies That Maximize Mobile

When it comes to mobile applications, there are ways agencies benefit from the data provided. To ensure you are getting the most from your application, here are some things to look for:

Understand = *know how riders feel about your service*

Does your app give you a means to constantly measure rider satisfaction? If you give riders a voice that you can make sense of, you will receive a more well-rounded perspective and know what changes are most desired. Higher barriers to communication often mean the only incentive for feedback is a negative experience, which disproportionately highlights those complaints while creating a perception that the agency isn't listening to riders or doesn't care what they have to say.

Communicate - *give riders information they care about*

How do you share alerts and important information with riders? Traditional options are static and passive, meaning often a rider doesn't look for information about a detour until they are waiting in the cold for a bus that isn't coming. An overload of information can also have the same effect as a lack of information — the intended audience doesn't get the message and the agency is seen as unreliable. Instead, surgically message riders based on actual stop/route use to give your alerts the urgency and credibility they deserve. As calls and complaints decrease, agency time and resources are freed up to address your riders' input.

Plan = *know how your riders move*

Can you see how your riders are travelling to, through and from your transit system? Current mobile technology replaces the need for costly, limited, and immediately-outdated onboard O/D surveys, combining the convenience of an app with the prevalence of mobile phones. The resulting data is on a scale previously impossible, charting your system's transit usage and surfacing unseen intelligence.



The TransLoc App

TransLoc is the transit technology leader with a first-class mobile application that is redefining expectations for users and agencies. The first transit app that actually gives something back to the agency, offering a no-work method to collect objective rider intent data as well as the first platform to communicate with riders at the route and stop level. The accurate arrival predictions and alerts for riders results in 76% of users launching the application at least twice a day, every weekday. The continually updated app provides a best-of-breed user experience and allows riders to quickly access the quality information they are seeking while increasing agency credibility and decreasing customer service calls.

76%
Of Users Use it

2 times
Every Day

Every
Weekday

Mobile is central to our solution and all of our services, and paired with TransLoc's OnDemand and Fixed Route solutions means agencies get the most advanced communication tools available, accurate data and the first technology alternative to onboard surveys. By aggregating and anonymizing the data riders choose to share via mobile application, our solutions illustrate in clear, effortless ways a visual display of how riders move to, through and from transit.

Conclusion

The saturation of access has unlocked an entirely new source of information and data for transit agencies. Choosing the right platform is critical to take advantage of this potential. There are custom options, crowdsourced options, and third-party apps that can all offer something to riders. To derive real value from an agency perspective, however, means finding the solution that gives you insight into your agency. By using our OnDemand and Fixed Route Solutions in conjunction with our TransLoc App, agencies can understand and communicate with their riders and plan based on how those riders are actually using the system — no data crunching required.



Sources:

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Techjury, How Much Time Does the Average American Spend on Their Phone? - July 28, 2020

Pew Research Center, Mobile Fact Sheet - June 12, 2019



4505 Emperor Boulevard,
Suite 120
Durham, NC 27703

 www.transloc.com