

HOME

Building Brand Name Transit in Rochester

MASS TRANSIT

BY JOE PETRIE ON FEB 9, 2015



RTS buses are seen as dependable, but a new look and logo will attract more riders to the system.

Photo credit: RTS

When Maryalice Keller joined the Rochester Genesee Regional Transportation Authority (RGRTA) as chief people and brand officer in September 2012, she walked into a job at an organization with a fairly new CEO and ambitious goals.

Keller said the agency wanted to improve service and ridership as it transformed and moved forward. It was also opening a new transit center in 2014, which meant there was a need to put the agency's best foot forward seeing as it was a project decades in the making.

"We really knew we had an opportunity," Keller said. "We were going to be in the spotlight and we wanted to be our best if you will."

Soon after the Keller came on the job, she and the leadership at the agency started on a two-year journey to rebrand service and relaunch how Rochester area residents see the agency and how employees do their job under a unified name — RTS.

An Authoritative Name

RTS CEO Bill Carpenter said the agency began holding focus groups with customers, infrequent riders and those who never rode the bus to get their perception on what the system meant to them. While riders found the system to be important and enjoyable, there was an image problem. The authority's logo hadn't changed since it was incepted in 1969 with a strong governmental look and the color scheme dated to the 1990s.

"There was immediate traction towards what we wanted to deliver on," he said. "It became very easy to expect to say that if we stay where we are we will stay where we are. To get where we're going to go, it's going to require an investment."

The agency operated in seven counties and paratransit service — all with different names. Ontario County also joined the system in August. In Genesee County, it was known as Batavia Bus Service (BBS); in Livingston County, it was called Livingston Area Transportation (LATS); in Ontario County it was County Area Transportation Service (CATS); in Orleans County it was Orleans Transit Service (OTS); in Seneca County, it was known as Seneca Transit Service (STS); in Wayne County it was known as Wayne Area Transportation (WATS); in Wyoming County it was known as Wyoming Transit Service (WYTS); and paratransit service was known as Lift Line.

A look at qualitative and quantitative data collected from focus groups showed eight different brand names caused issues.

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"Each of them had a different brand name so there was no understanding or awareness that it was all the transit authority," Keller said. "Customers overall were quite pleased with the experience on the system and found it to be an important part of the community. It has been around for decades and decades and while they found it to be reliable, at the same time, they saw the image as a bit outdated and from the logo, it was a little bit frumpy."

Jim Redmond, chairman of the RGRTA Board of Directors said the proposal to rebrand the system was a big one, but something that merited discussion when brought to the board because of the potential impact it had to give more of a sense of a unified system with one name and one color scheme.

"You know before it was RTS, when you went with the name of the transit authority — RGRTA — it doesn't exactly roll off the tongue," he said. "But RTS does."

Getting Where They Want to Go

Keller said the staff took a classic process to assess and develop the rebranding, laying out steps and phased within a timetable with anticipation of a soft launch in May before unleashing it on the public in August.

Carpenter said the focus group was challenged to think what would happen if public transit ceased in Rochester including those who don't regularly ride the system. Once the group thought about it more, it allowed them to see how they or friends and relatives who do use the bus would be impacted.

After performing an audit, Keller said they came up with the RTS master brand for service in all counties. For example, CATS was changed to RTS-Ontario.

"When I first came into this position a little over three years ago, we told our customers what they should think, but we really didn't market to them," Carpenter said. "And we didn't market to our employees about who we were and what made us successful and what we're committing to tell our customers."

After coming out with the master brand, Keller said the authority needed to determine how to launch the rebranding, so they sought input from employees to make sure it was rolled out as a system with a mission they can deliver on.

"Our brand promises people that we make it easy to enjoy your journey and that's reflected in our tagline 'enjoy the ride,'" Keller said. "We started talking to employees and defining our roles on how we deliver on that brand.

"That process meant defining what does that mean, how do we define that, how do we assess that, deliver on that and prepare for that internally."

All of this was done with just the help of the four person marketing team inside the authority, with the help of Antithesis Advertising and Clarion Research.

"That was a really huge undertaking," said Megan Jasinski, director of communications and marketing for RTS. "We needed to be very, very detail oriented to execute on that brand. At one point I had a spreadsheet of 300 rows with due dates, cost estimates, responsibilities and next steps.

"It was a lot."

Carpenter said Keller began to communicate with the rest of the organization about what was missing and develop awareness, then pinpointed the key stakeholders to show them it was worth the investment. He immediately saw it was worth the investment.

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"When I came on board, we were the bus company," Carpenter said. "We were dependable, we were reliable, but nobody knew how you had to behave in order for customers to get dependability and reliability."

Redmond said one of the biggest discussions amongst board members during the rebranding was choosing a new logo and how their choices compared to those of the focus groups.

"One thing when you talk about a brand promise, you have to make sure you're aligned with the customers' actual experience," Redmond said. "And if it's not, then it's going to fail. You have to know if you're delivering a solid product, if the buses are on time, if the buses are clean, if the buses are safe."

External Pushback

Changing the name of a transit system is not only a challenge in planning, it's also expensive. Rochester had to spend about \$1 million to complete the project. This meant explaining to the public why the authority is going to spend nearly \$1 million to rebrand itself and why it was a good idea.

Keller said there was some pushback in the community for using taxpayer money in such a manner, especially when some would ask if the \$1 million was better spent on new routes or services instead.

"At the time the image of the organization hadn't been examined in decades and decades and we're working hard to build a public transit system resource available to residents," she said.

Carpenter said he wasn't put off by the \$1 million price tag because half of it fell under items needed even without a new brand, such as replacing bus stop signage and getting new uniforms.

"The board had to look at this significant investment we were proposing and they agreed it was worth the investment and time," Keller said. "It really mattered to the ongoing success of the authority. Not only were we trying to transform the experience for customers, but we're building a transit system to attract more and more customers and the future generation."

Redmond said the proposal was something the board needed to give consideration to given how the agency transformed itself in the past decade. In 2004, he said the authority was in dire straits, but has since adopted a private sector mindset to get back on track, so a rebranding follows the same mentality.

"What this does is it gives us consistency because branding as one organization means we have one name and one look and that's important when you're seeing a product," he said. "We want to be providers of a choice. We know that people have options. It's not one of those things where we're the only game in town. We compete basically with drivers.

"In Rochester, commute times are ridiculously short. On average, commute times take 22-25 minutes, so to convince people it's worth their while to take public transit, you have to be a good product. You have to be clean, you have to be safe and you have to be on time.

"And secondly, it has to have a sharp look about it."

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Going Live

Once all the plans were set, Rochester was ready to roll out the RTS brand in August.

"The buy in, it was a significant investment not only of time and resources, it's a significant investment because you want people to believe it's worthwhile," Keller said. "I was kind of overjoyed how supportive employees throughout the processes adopted it and embraced it and have to be supportive.

"But equal to that, you've got to be able to deliver it and it's a very big leap to make such a change in brand and have people believe it."

Jasinski said the new RTS brand is being marketed using television, radio and social media, including new messages targeting millennials using animated commercials of daydreams while riding the bus.

Before the message went to the public, Jasinski said the rebranding was marketed to employees. One way to get them excited for the change was making an internal video with employees dancing and singing a song "It's Easy," sung to the tune of the Run-DMC hit "It's Tricky."

"I think it's really important to market the brand internally before it's marketed externally, because it's really important to get employees behind the new brand and the brand promise 'RTS makes it easy to enjoy your journey,'" she said.

Carpenter said the rebranding allowed the authority to create a new set of standards for employee behavior. It reminds them they're all part of customer service and the brand pushes the standard of customer service and providing the best product possible.

"Again, it get back to that a promise was made, so we need to live up to that promise and be conscious of the promise," Carpenter said. "That takes the conversation to another level. Everybody has been through the brand promise is committed to do it, so the debate isn't 'well, that's not my job.' It's 'I need to think about what I'm delivering to customers.'"

Jasinski said RTS will assess the impact of the rebranding the next several years to see any shift in perception and increased awareness of the brand. They also plan to build off the change by using it to tackle other rider barriers, such as how to ride, how to read a bus schedule or how to use a mobile app to use the system.

"I'm really excited to have a set of standards to work off of," she said. "We have that now, and we didn't before."

Although the rebranding went live in August, there are still plenty of buses with old logos on them, Carpenter said. The agency decided to take a longer term approach to replacement of old logos. He said a small percentage of buses will be painted and the authority purchased 25,000 vinyl's to put a fresh look on many of the buses.

"We're going through the fleet to kind of refresh some of them, but as we order new buses they will come in with a completely brand new look," He said. "And it looks very sharp."

Carpenter said the success of the rebranding for him focuses on customer satisfaction, with a bottom line metric of growing ridership for RTS.

"It's that level of customer satisfaction of what we're doing that the growth will come from," he said. "It's about satisfied customers telling others more often."