



STEPHEN NELLIS PHOTO

CHK America CEO Rick Wood with one of the company's new automated transit kiosks. The firm counts transit systems in Los Angeles, Chicago and Washington, D.C. among its clients.

A soft touch for transit

CHK America builds interactive route maps for cities

By Stephen Nellis
Staff Writer

If you've ever navigated a public transit system in Los Angeles, Chicago or Washington, D.C., chances are you have seen Santa Barbara-based CHK America's work.

CHK designs, makes and maintains the maps and signs that help riders navigate bus and train routes. It counts about 15 of the largest 20 public transit systems in the United States as customers. Earlier this month, the company jumped into the 21st century with interactive touch-screen kiosks that can help riders plan custom routes and see precisely when the next bus will arrive, in addition to traditional functions of the maps.

The first unit is being tested at the Santa Barbara MTD Transit Center, where the company will be refining the software that runs the system to make it as useful as possible to riders.

"It looks like a big iPhone," said CEO Rick Wood. "We needed a test bed, so we thought MTD would be a good place to start so we can come

watch people use it. It's cloud-based, so we can update it remotely. We can tell where people are getting hung up, which is important to us as we update."

Much like constructing a website or software interface, designing transit maps and tables goes far beyond making them pretty. It involves distilling complex route and time information into graphics that users can read and understand as easily as street signs.

"Imagine a city with no signs. Wayfinding is directing people in public places," Wood said. "Transit is one of most complicated challenges in wayfinding. Because there are so many variables, it leads to cognitive overload. It's trying to express massive amounts of info in a way that people are comfortable with."

CHK's company slogan is "eight seconds." The company carried out a two-year study of how riders use signage in public transit. It found that riders will give up on signage if they can't at least start to find what they're looking for within eight seconds. "We

realized that if they did not become engaged with your information in eight seconds, they walk away," he said.

The new interactive kiosks add several layers of complexity because they involves multiple menus and screens. But they also open the door to much more flexibility — the platform can integrate with GPS systems on buses to display not only when the vehicle is expected to arrive, but where it actually is and whether it might be running late. It can integrate with ticketing systems. And, through its custom route features, riders can plug in where they want to go, and the system will tell them exactly which routes they need to take in addition to how long it would take to walk or ride a bicycle. Wood said the hope is that it will help transit agencies better utilize some of their lesser-known routes and gather the data to optimize routes if needed.

"One of the issues all transportation agencies face is that riders tend to use their same route," Wood said. "What's the best way to educate people about

all the services the agency offers?"

The challenge for CHK is to do all that while making it as intuitive as iPad. "I've seen 7-year-olds come up and use this without any problems," Wood said at the MTD Transit Center in Santa Barbara.

CHK America was founded 14 years ago. Wood, who had started Santa Barbara-based Maps.com, was approached by the British company that had designed all the signage for the London Underground and wanted to expand into America. He took the job, and since then, CHK America has pioneered a number of new initiatives, such as the biggest solar-powered bus kiosk system in the nation in Fort Worth, Texas.

Wood said there's already strong interest in interactive kiosks. With all the possibilities that touch-screen technology opened up, he said he's more excited than ever about helping millions of people find their way every day. "Our clients carry over 20 percent of all transit riders in the U.S.," Wood said. "This business has such a hugely positive impact on people."