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Santa Barbara company rolls out interactive kiosk for bus riders

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A Santa Barbara-based company has unveiled a transit solution that is giving bus riders a whole new perspective of the South Coast.

CHK America, which provides customized information systems for bus passengers across the U.S. - is showcasing its interactive touchscreen transit kiosk - called ConnectPoint - at the Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District's Transit Center.

CHK chose to launch the kiosk in Santa Barbara as a way to gain feedback in its hometown, said Rick Wood, the company's president and CEO.

"It is a pilot project with lots of potential," said Mr. Wood, confident that products like ConnectPoint will continue to help customers here and elsewhere more easily access public transit.

While confident about the technology, Mr. Wood said CHK will make sure any bugs are worked out and the transit agency and the company will discuss in the coming months whether and how to expand the service.

"Santa Barbara MTD is the first agency to make ConnectPoint available to its passengers," he said. "However, agencies from across the nation already are expressing interest."

With more than 10,000 passengers using the Transit Center every day, the kiosk seemed to be popular with local bus riders just days after it was installed.

Mr. Wood smiled as customers lined up to give the system a go. "It's like a giant iPhone," he said, as passengers keyed in information on the screen related to bus locations and schedules.

"The teens and 20-somethings are whizzing right through it," he said.

Kasumi Yusa and Keyaki Kanno, exchange students from Japan, mapped their bus travel with aplomb.

"Absolutely perfect," Mr. Wood said as one of the girls gave him a high five. "They speak limited English and yet have complete understanding."

Mr. Wood said the touch-screen technology allows customers to interact with the information - whether they are seeking to find out the next bus departure or they would like to view their entire route to determine the best bus stop at which to disembark.

"It's a familiar interface," he said.

The kiosk also provides trip planning tools that include directions for transit, cars, bicycling and walking. It even allows the customer to enter an email or mobile phone number in order to receive trip planning directions directly.

Mr. Wood said the kiosk represented about nine months worth of work for his product development team. Because of the competitive landscape, he declined to say what startup costs were.

"Let's just say it's not an inexpensive effort," he said.

The kiosk can be customized to provide non-transit information such as the weather, Yelp reviews, news headlines and more. With the ability to display online advertisements, ConnectPoint also has the potential to be a revenue-generator for transit agencies.

"ConnectPoint is the natural next step for transit agencies who are already providing passengers with information via bus stop panels, system maps and their website," Mr. Wood said.

Established in 1999, CHK America provides customized information design solutions and purpose-built hardware fabrications for 20 percent of public transit customers in the U.S.

According to Mr. Wood, the company's "8-Second Rule" has set the standard for communicating complex public transit information to customers after CHK's research identified that customers allow only eight



STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

With limited coaching from CHK America's Rick Wood, Keyaki Kanno, center, and Kasumi Yusa, right, map out their bus schedules.



Rick Wood said the interactive transit kiosk, developed by CHK America, is catching on with local bus riders.

seconds in which to interpret travel information before becoming frustrated - resulting in customer dissatisfaction.

A division of a U.K.-headquartered company, CHK (the letters stand for Cook, Hammond and Kell), was established in Santa Barbara in 1999.

Whenever CHK's boss visits a new city, he frequently hops a bus, subway or light-rail train in order to get around and also size up the competition.

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