

# The 8-Second Rule: Successfully Guiding Passengers to Their Destinations

By Kristen Force

*Effective community and public transit agencies deploy information and signage in specific, studied methods in order to ease passengers' use of the system. The ability for new and return transit customers to have the precise information they need to reach their destinations is key to the passenger experience.*

A map is usually the first tool that comes to mind when helping customers navigate a transit system. However, if simply providing a system map is the extent of the guidance your agency provides, you're not likely to be capturing all of the ridership possible.

A more system-wide approach that factors in how people make decisions and process information is the most effective solution, recommends Rick Wood, President and CEO of CHK America, Inc. His Santa Barbara, Calif.-based company designs clear, concise and easy-to-understand customer information solutions for public transit agencies, employing an 8-second premise. That is, based on studies conducted by the company, customers will only allow 8 seconds to view a piece of information, in which time if they don't begin receiving useful answers to their questions they will become frustrated, resulting in customer anxiety or dissatisfaction.



Route and schedule maps are one component of an overall service information strategy.

## Be Cognizant of How People Solve Problems

Solving the public transportation puzzle can be overwhelming to customers, especially in unfamiliar environments, such as a transit system in a different city or with an unfamiliar route in their own city. The distractions caused by other people, sounds, traffic and weather can further add to a customer's cognitive load, which is the total amount of mental activity occurring in one's working memory at a given moment. The greater the cognitive load, the more impaired

decision-making becomes. In public transportation, cognitive overload is an all-too-common barrier for customers attempting to navigate systems that appear too complex to be used confidently and easily.

This potentially stress-inducing environment makes effective communication between the transit agency and customer essential. While route and schedule maps are critical sources of information for customers, they should be one component of an overall strategy for providing

service information. The most effective route and schedule tools account for a riders' problem solving abilities, tendencies and preferences for layout and design. Customers look for answers on maps, on at-stop panels and in summary-of-service guides, all of which need to provide fundamental elements of information to assist passengers in successfully planning and completing their trip.

"The design of information pieces should break down large tasks into smaller, more manageable steps," Wood says. "Each element should be clearly identifiable so that customers take one step at a time to achieve their overall endeavor."

The first problem usually facing customers is identifying where they are currently located within the system. Applying CHK's 8-second rule, customers must feel confident in their ability to solve this problem within those initial few seconds.

"Customers should be able to start to understand maps and other tools as they approach them," Wood explains. "Poor information definitely limits use of a system. Lost riders and under-utilized systems are bad situations for transit agencies that can be minimized with better design and communication."

Not only is a well-developed system of information crucial for current customers, it's also vital for infrequent and new riders, who must be encouraged every step of their journey if they



APPROXIMATE DEPARTURE TIMES FROM THIS STOP

2 Eastbound to UCLA/ Westwood			3 Northbound to Santa Monica/ UCLA		
Weekday lines-variant	Saturday subsidy	Sunday dampings	Weekday lines-variant	Saturday subsidy	Sunday dampings
AM 6:24	AM 6:41	AM 7:11	AM 6:09	AM 6:23	AM 6:41 B
6:38	7:11	7:41	6:23	6:33	7:11 B
6:50	7:36	8:11	6:38	7:23	7:41 B
7:04	8:01	8:41	6:52	7:47	8:11 B
7:19	8:26	9:11	7:06	7:56	8:41 B
7:32	8:51	9:36	7:20	8:12	9:11 B
7:47	9:16	10:01	7:35	8:26	9:41 B
8:02	9:42	10:22	7:50	8:41	10:11 B
8:17	10:02	10:42	8:05	8:56	10:36 B
8:32	10:22	11:02	8:20	9:11	11:00 B
8:47	10:42	11:22	8:35	9:26	11:18 B
9:02	11:02	11:42	8:50	9:41	11:40 B
9:16	11:22	12:02	9:05	9:57	11:58 B
9:31	11:42	12:20	9:20	10:12	12:18 B
9:46	12:02	12:41	9:35	10:27	12:36 B
10:00	12:20	1:00	9:50	10:42	12:48 B
10:20	12:41	1:19	10:05	10:57	12:59 B
10:40	1:00	1:37	10:20	11:12	1:14 B
11:00	1:19	1:56	10:35	11:27	1:29 B
11:20	1:37	2:15	10:50	11:42	1:44 B
11:40	1:56	2:34	11:05	11:57	1:59 B
11:59	2:15	2:53	11:20	12:12	2:14 B
PM 12:19	2:34	3:12	11:35	12:27	2:29 B
12:39	2:53	3:31	11:50	12:42	2:44 B
12:56	3:12	3:50	12:05	12:57	2:59 B
1:15	3:31	4:09	12:20	1:12	3:14 B
1:35	3:50	4:28	12:35	1:27	3:29 B
1:52	4:09	4:47	12:50	1:42	3:44 B
2:10	4:28	5:06	1:05	1:57	3:59 B
2:29	4:47	5:25	1:20	2:12	4:14 B
2:48	5:06	5:44	1:35	2:27	4:29 B
3:03	5:25	6:03	1:50	2:42	4:44 B
3:18	5:44	6:22	2:05	2:57	4:59 B
3:33	6:03	6:39	2:20	3:12	5:14 B
3:48	6:22	6:58	2:35	3:27	5:29 B
4:03	6:39	7:13	2:50	3:42	5:44 B
4:18	6:58	7:43	3:05	3:57	5:59 B
4:33	7:13	7:59	3:20	4:12	6:14 B
4:48	7:32	8:13	3:35	4:27	6:29 B
5:03	7:50	8:43	3:50	4:42	6:44 B
5:18	8:13	9:13	4:05	4:57	6:59 B
5:33	8:45	9:43	4:20	5:12	7:14 B
5:48	9:13	10:13	4:35	5:27	7:29 B

are to continue choosing public transportation for their travel needs.

## Make Some Assumptions

Although transit systems serve a variety of customers, some assumptions are safe to make when designing information guides. First, nearly all customers have a destination in mind and

are seeking assurance that they are making the right decisions to get them to their desired location. As Wood says, "Customers need continual affirmation that their decision-making process is correct and this need can be supported with a consistent system of information."

Second, customers need assurance about wait times. The arrival time of the next bus or train should be prominently displayed. Real-time updates further reassure customers that they are in the right place and that public transportation will meet their needs.

Third, customers must understand how to make connections within the system. Wood acknowledges that providing connection information can be difficult, but stresses its importance if the system is to be used to its full potential. "Clearly communicating connection information allows the whole system to function as a network instead of a system of individual routes."

## Follow Good Design Principles

A transit system's success largely rests on its ability to guide customers quickly and easily. Like any form of communication or marketing, a transit agency's informational materials must be clear, visually appealing and sensitive to the audience's needs and preferences.

CHK America uses simple, sans-serif fonts such as **Helvetica** or **Arial** in a large print size, avoiding any font size smaller than 10 points. And while colors are great, less can be more. The company utilizes a 13-color palette, but



Local Bus Service		Light Rail Service	
Line	Frequency	Line	Frequency
101	15 min	1	15 min
102	15 min	2	15 min
103	15 min	3	15 min
104	15 min	4	15 min
105	15 min	5	15 min
106	15 min	6	15 min
107	15 min	7	15 min
108	15 min	8	15 min
109	15 min	9	15 min

rarely uses them all together. Wood stresses that colors must be easily distinguishable to convey a clear message to customers.

For route maps, relationships matter more than scale. For example, stops and stations should be in the right location relative to rivers, highways and other landmarks but exact distances are less important. For stops with significant pedestrian traffic, Wood recommends using an area or neighborhood map with a 5-minute walking circle centered on the stop or station. Also, by including well-known land-



For route maps, relationships matter more than scale.

marks and points of interest, the customer feels more at ease as they see recognizable sites both on the map and from the bus window.

Finally, bus stops are the last decision point for customers who must feel confident that the bus they are about to board will get them where they need to go. In the absence of information at this critical final step, customers question whether the bus will even show up or when it does, if it's the right bus to get them to their destination. Transit agencies that display well-designed information panels directly at bus stops are providing an important resource for customers. Information panels should include a diagrammatic representation of the routes serving the stop, offer an easy-to-understand

service summary, and include clear indications of where connections can be made.

“At-stop information panels allow customers to quickly identify where they are and where they can go,” says Wood. “Including a legend and timetables also further facilitates the customers’ decision-making processes.”

Does your transit system provide initial answers to basic passenger questions within the first 8 seconds of being viewed? It’s challenging, but vital, for transit agencies to translate their complex system of services and functionality into easy-to-understand diagrams, tables and other informational tools for customers. When each communications piece is part of a system-wide solution the result is a network of transit routes that are confidently navigated by novice and experienced riders alike. Remember, confident riders turn into repeat riders, which results in increased ridership. **CT**

*Kristen Force is a former trade magazine editor and freelance writer in Washington, D.C., with an extensive background in writing on public transportation and automotive topics. She is the former executive editor of Government Fleet Magazine and F&I Magazine, which are trade publications covering transportation and automotive topics, respectively.*