

Wednesday, June 20, 2012

CHK Points In the Right Direction Business is Booming For Santa Barbara Mapmakers

By Brandon Fastman

In Southern California, cars are king, but Rick Wood is betting that public transportation is the new cool. So far, it's a bet he's winning. The founder and CEO of Santa Barbara-based CHK America — a company that designs, installs, and maintains transit maps — Wood boasts 10 years of profitability, a three-year backlog of contracts, and is looking to add to his 14-person staff.

As environmental consciousness and gas prices increase, public transportation is undergoing an image upgrade. According to a 2011 Urban Land Institute study, in 2035, the demand for homes in California within half a mile of public transit will exceed not only current supply but also the supply of homes predicted to be built between now and then.

As it is, 71 percent of Californians factor public transit options into their home-buying decisions. With accounts stretching from Santa Barbara to San Diego and including the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Wood is taking advantage of those trends.

“Public transit is basically a complex puzzle,” said Wood, who

was also a cofounder of Santa Barbara-based maps.com. CHK's mapmakers must design maps that help passengers solve that puzzle without overwhelming them. After teaming up with Britain's University of Essex psychology department, Wood learned that map reading is limited by “cognitive load,” how much information a person can process at once. More exactly, passengers will give up attempting to read a map if they haven't begun to understand it in eight seconds. Therefore, CHK does its best to clarify maps, straightening out roads and removing extraneous information.

Toward the goal of simplifying public transportation, CHK invented “12-minute maps,” which pinpoint buses that run every 12 minutes or less, thus eliminating the need for riders to read timetables. Research shows that if a rider barely misses a bus, he or she is willing to wait about 12 minutes for the next one but not much more.

While CHK's stock-in-trade is maps for public transit systems, the company's goal is to create entire regional systems of maps that will



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Rick Wood shows diagrams and maps his firm has created for agencies across the nation.

help get customers from their starting point to their destination. According to the study the company commissioned, titled “The Psychology of Wayfaring,” the biggest hurdle in meeting that challenge is the last mile of travel, which must be facilitated by pedestrian maps.

CHK provided such maps — which it fabricates in Pittsburgh — for the business and tourist districts of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina flooded the city in 2005. Among his accomplishments since founding CHK in 1999, Wood counts his effort in helping to rebuild The Big Easy as his proudest.