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FINDING THE WAY:

SB-based CHK America's maps help people navigate cities around the world

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When Rick Wood visits a new city, he frequently hops a bus, subway or light-rail train in order to get around. More often than not, the color-coded passenger information maps along the way are the handiwork of some of the planners, designers and cartographers of the Santa Barbara-based business which he leads: CHK America.

Helping transit customers get from Points A to B with rider-friendly maps has been the focus of CHK America, a division of a U.K.-headquartered company (the CHK stands for Cook, Hammond and Kell), ever since it was established in Santa Barbara in 1999.

"Our wayfinding maps are everywhere — from Waukesha, Wisconsin, to the legendary London Underground," said Mr. Wood, president and CEO of the company, discussing the firm's unique niche in the mass transit world.

Equally noteworthy is a large contract the business just landed. CHK America recently announced it has been awarded the customer information design, installation and maintenance contract for nearly 10,000 bus stops in in the nation's capital.

The five-year contract calls for original designs using CHK's Spider Diagrams to be placed at the busiest bus stop locations of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

In terms of dollars, Mr. Wood was reluctant to state the winning bid amount because of the competitive landscape of the industry in which he works. However, he did say the dollar value made this CHK's largest design contract to date, and will supply good-paying jobs for the company's 10-15 person workforce, which ebbs and flows.

"The development of stop-specific customer information puts WMATA at the forefront of transit agencies in the U.S. and on par with the great transportation networks of Europe," said Mr. Wood, who previously worked with another local outfit, Maps.com, before taking on his current job.

"Growth has been very good the last ten years," said Mr. Wood during a recent interview at the MTD Transit Center in downtown Santa Barbara, which was hopping with customers, both area residents and visitors.

For WMATA, the crew at CHK America will design stop-specific schedule information and easy-to-read route schematics identifying where a customer is within the system, critical connecting information and clearly presented schedules. The customer information panels will be installed in new and existing hardware that is affixed to the bus stop poles currently within the D.C. system.

Mr. Wood said the firm will also bid for the fabrication part of the contract through competitive bidding. "We have a fabricating partner in Pittsburgh that builds a lot of the custom-made, kiosk-type displays, many of which are backlit, thanks to solar panels," said Mr. Wood, eager to keep the work in the U.S.A.

With gas hikes and environmental concerns at the top of many people's minds, transit agencies in the U.S. have seen an explosion in ridership the past few years, a trend that should bode well for the South Coast firm.

In addition to Santa Barbara's Metropolitan Transit District, the company has provided customer wayfinding information for transit systems in Ventura, Santa Monica, Pasadena, Los Angeles County, San Diego and Monterey-Salinas.

Outside the Golden State, the firm has gotten work — ranging from customized information design and purpose-built hardware fabrications — from transit agencies in Chicago, Dallas, Austin, Fort Worth and Arlington, Virginia.

According to Mr. Wood, CHK America now reaches 20 percent of the public transportation customers in the U.S.

Keeping things simple is the company's mantra.

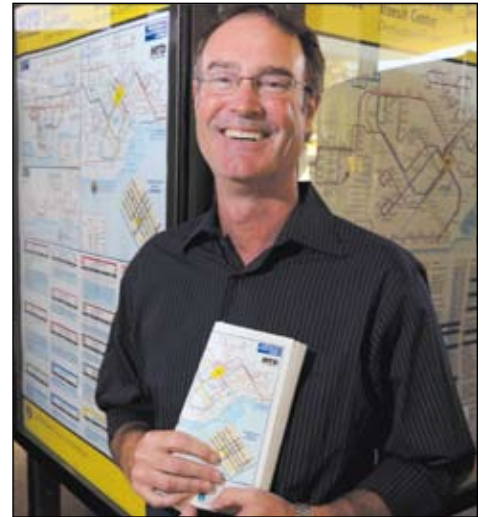
When designing the maps, he said he lives by the "eight-second rule," meaning riders should be able to figure out where they need to be within eight seconds. That seemed to be just the right time limit for new Transit Center customers figuring out how to reach destination points in the fastest, most efficient manner.

Before installation of the maps, bus riders had to rely on a schedule book, which MTD officials considered less efficient.

Longtime bus rider Juan Aleman, making transfer connections between his job at La Cumbre Plaza to his home in Goleta, said the maps help him negotiate his way around the Santa Barbara area, and he eagerly gave tips to other riders new to the system. "They're easy to understand," said the gregarious Mr. Aleman of the maps. Employed at Albertson's, Mr. Aleman, 24, is well versed on the daily timetables as well as the holiday schedules. "I know all the drivers by name," he said. "Write that I'm happy with the bus service and MTD does a great job!"

Happy to oblige, an MTD spokesman said the maps, which are displayed in a kiosk at the Transit Center and on poles at bus stops along State and Hollister, provide access to information about routes and schedules right at the stops, helping people to wait less and making riding the bus even easier.

"We enjoy working with (a local vendor like) CHK," said David Damiano. "They bring to the table a lot of experience from many years working



STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Rick Wood, shown at the Transit Center in downtown Santa Barbara, runs a local company that helps millions of U.S. transit riders figure how to get around. The firm recently inked a contract to provide wayfinding information to a transit agency in the nation's capital, the company's largest design contract to date.



Bus rider Juan Aleman checks out the color-coded maps at the downtown Transit Center.

in Europe, including the London Underground, yet they've been able to adapt that technology to a small city like Santa Barbara.

"We appreciate their creativity."

Indeed, the company is well positioned to adapt to the needs of any client, especially when it adjusts schedules and routes. "Many agencies adjust their services three times a year," said Mr. Wood, talking about ongoing maintenance contracts, especially for systems that include both rail and bus to help people reach their final destinations.

"We work with the very small and large and everywhere in between," said Mr. Wood of transit customers. "We don't just go after the mega. We like to help at every level."

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