Car Sharing: The University Experience

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Background

In the spring of 2011, The University of Texas at Austin welcomed a new partner to this campus. This new partner promised to bring a more sustainable lifestyle to the forefront by freeing people from their cars. The concept was simple: Bring a variety of fun and utilitarian vehicles to the campus and let the community have access to them by the day and by the hour at low cost. The variety in the fleet, provided by the innovative company Zipcar, allowed consumers to have options in what they drove based on their individual needs. Since the program’s adoption on our campus, Zipcar has flourished and provided its “Zipsters” with “wheels when they want them.”

Program Objectives

The objectives were simple in this new Green on the Go initiative: establish a car sharing program that helps to reduce UT Austin’s carbon footprint; promote sustainability; and reduce vehicular congestion. The program also aimed to increase Green on the Go transportation options, keep the UT community actively engaged in alternative transportation, and increase symbiosis of other Green on the Go program pairings. For instance, car sharing provides Zipcar members with the last mile of transportation. For carpool or vanpool members, car sharing provides members with the opportunity to leave campus for appointments and to run impromptu errands. Zipcar was a perfect fit for this eco-friendly framework. Not only does the program promote sustainability through its primary mission of reducing vehicle ownership, but every Zipcar removes 15-20 personally owned vehicles from the streets, thereby reducing vehicle congestion and ultimately emissions. The math is simple: less cars on the roads leads to less traffic and less pollutants being emitted into our atmosphere. Further, members who practice car sharing have also been known to sell a vehicle or stop the purchase decision of a new vehicle because they now have access to an entire fleet of vehicles.
After one full semester, the Zipcar team reviewed usage from each of the pods to determine whether the pod was in the most strategic location possible. If the pod locations did not meet the reservation threshold then the vehicles were removed and placed in other pre-identified locations.

Numbers that Count

Starting a new program on this campus came with lofty goals and unexpected outcomes, but the proof of how successful car sharing has been and continues to be is in the statistics that have collected over the past year. Since the program’s inception membership has doubled and is on its way to tripling. The fastest growing areas that Zipcar covers in the City of Austin include the university and the downtown sector. Overall, there are 20 locations throughout the city where members can
reserve cars. The 20 locations make up a fleet of nearly 50 vehicles that continues to grow as demand increases.

Program Success

Overall, the program has been a huge success on our campus and the university could not ask for a better partner. One factor that have made car sharing such a huge success over the past year includes picking the right vehicle locations on the campus. Location is everything when it comes to car sharing. There has to be easy access to the car. If you don't have a prime location then the vehicle is unusable. The community must be able to easily find the car and there must be easy access to transit lines since members practice a car free lifestyle.

Another key to success is providing variety in the fleet. Everyone is different and has different tastes and well as different needs. Zipcar provides a solution to fit everyone's lifestyle when it comes to vehicles, from the "environmentally conscious" car to the "road-trip for me and five of my friends" car to the "I need a big car for big job" vehicle. The vehicles on our campus were carefully selected to represent our bustling campus community with every need and want carefully thought of. The program's fleet includes: three Ford Focus, one Honda Civic, two Mini Coopers, one Honda Insight, one Toyota Tacoma, one Honda CR-V, one Scion xB, and one Nissan Sentra.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Starting a new program is always exciting and there are many things that can be learned from the first full year. In the beginning, the university was extremely apprehensive of starting a car share program on the campus because it was still considered a new concept and

Figure 2. Buck slip used for marketing.
not many universities had implemented their version of car sharing. However, with a full year under way we now had the data and program popularity to expand our program in fleet size as well as in areas served.

Some important lessons learned along the way included finding many champions to back the program. From staff members to departments to students, anyone can be a champion. Across the campus we worked with the Office of Sustainability, Student Government, Freshman Admissions, the International Office, Resident Assistants as well as a variety of other supporters to help us get the word out about the program and to encourage usage.

The champions really helped to drive membership and promote sustainability among the campus community.

Lastly, for any program to be success a strong marketing campaign has to be built. Working with other departments and student organization are an effective way to build a grass roots campaign that reaches the most people possible. Continuous word of mouth is free, environmentally sustainable, and quite possibly the best way to reach the target audience.

Concluding Remarks

Adding a car sharing program to our campus was one of the best initiatives the university could have adopted. The partnership that was formed has been invaluable for the Green on the Go program. Car sharing has addressed a variety of transportation issues on this campus as well as provided just one other way the campus community can move in and around the university and city without a personally owned vehicle. As our community becomes more and more eco-centric programs such as these will continue to be at the forefront expanding and offering multifaceted benefits to members and the community at large.