

Case Study » TRIANGLE TRANSIT AUTHORITY

SYNOPSIS

Ontira's TripFinder provides door-to-door, web-based trip planning across multiple counties in North Carolina's Research Triangle region

BACKGROUND

Triangle Transit Authority (TTA) is a public transportation provider, operating in North Carolina's Research Triangle region, which spans the Durham, Orange and Wake Counties. The TTA works together with Capital Area Transit (CAT), Durham Area Transit Authority (DATA), and Chapel Hill Transit (CHT) to provide local and regional bus services. Additional transit services are also provided by seven other organizations: Duke University Transit, the North Carolina State University Wolfline, Orange Public Transportation, CTran, Wake Coordinated Transportation Services, Amtrak, and Carolina Trailways/Greyhound.

THE NEED

With so many agencies working together to provide services, the TTA needed a unified approach to customer service. The TTA and its partners in the Research Triangle region (CAT, DATA, and CHT) each worked independently to provide trip planning services to their customers. Therefore, customer service agents were unable to provide full itineraries for trips that required transfers between transit systems. Instead, callers were being referred to other agencies to find information about connecting services.

When completing a trip planning request, customer service agents were manually generating itineraries by using paper schedules or their own knowledge of the system. Customers could also access this information on their own, as each agency had its route schedules posted on its website, along with links to other agency websites. However, if a trip required transfers between systems, the customer had to visit multiple agency websites to find the all the necessary information to complete the trip.

This situation reflected a need for improved customer service and an integrated, easy method for planning trips across counties.

THE SOLUTION

In 2003, the TTA selected WM-data (formerly Novo Group), one of Northern Europe's leading IT companies, and its North American partner, Ontira Communications, to provide an Automated Traveler Information System (ATIS) solution for trip planning. Ontira worked with WM-data to provide the TTA with TripFinder, a web-based trip planning application. Available 24/7 via a website developed specifically to provide multi-agency regional transit information (www.gotriangle.org), TripFinder provides transit riders in the Research Triangle Region with address-to-address itinerary planning as well as schedules, route maps and general information.

With numerous agencies involved, the challenge was to accurately incorporate the multiple scheduling, fare and GIS databases from the agencies involved. Ontira and WM-data's team successfully tackled these challenges by utilizing TripFinder's open architecture to ensure smooth integration of all available transit information. The result was a truly multi-modal, regional trip planning system, capable of generating itineraries that cross service boundaries and transportation modes.

Riders now visit one website to plan trips across counties and to receive accurate information on the varying fare schedules that exist in each service area. TripFinder users enter the trip origin and destination by typing an address, intersection, or landmark, by selecting a stop from a list, or by clicking an interactive map. Once users



ONTIRA CUSTOMERS SAY...

"The Paratransit IVR has increasingly reduced our labor cost each of the last three years, totaling over \$274,000. The IVR provides an efficient and effective alternative for our customers to cancel, confirm, and schedule trips throughout the weekend, without the need to speak with a live agent. Our staff is able to be home with their families, our customers' business needs are met, and our labor cost is measurably reduced."

*David Sheppard
Senior Specialist,
Management Services
Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART)*

1/2



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adjust the date and time of the trip, TripFinder does the rest. TripFinder quickly returns detailed trip plans, including the length of the suggested trips, transfer locations and times, fares, and walking directions. Trip itineraries are also shown dynamically on a map, which allows users to pan and zoom in/out on desired locations or routes.

In addition to the public website, TripFinder includes a Call Center module for customer service representatives at each of the four transit agencies' call centers. Agents now use TripFinder's Customer Service Module to provide information over the phone in four distributed call centers. Agents utilize TripFinder to provide trip plans to callers, search for stops and routes, and retrieve detailed schedule information not available to the general public. Instead of the old paper-based method, agents are able to respond much more quickly to customer inquiries. The time saved also allows agents to focus on customers who require more attention or personalized service.

RESULTS

TripFinder has been online and in operation since the fall of 2003 and currently averages well over 100,000 trip requests per month, peaking at 390,297 requests in the month of September 2005 alone.

Not only is TripFinder a handy tool for the public, it is also enhancing public awareness of transit and contributing to community goals. Online trip planning is highly publicized during the annual six-week SmartCommute Challenge, where commuters are asked to pledge to try to use any alternative mode of transportation to get to school or work, like carpool, vanpool, bus, bike, or telecommute. The convenience and 24/7 availability of an online trip planner contributes greatly to the success of this campaign.

FUTURE PLANS

TTA and its partners actively develop their services within each agency's operations and on a regional basis. TTA's plans for trip planning enhancements include upgrading to the new version of the TripFinder system to provide users with an easier-to-use public interface and greater functionality. In addition, the TripFinder Call Center module will be highly utilized in a new regional customer call center, which will begin operations in March 2007. TTA and its partners also intend to integrate IVR and AVL technology with the TripFinder system in the next 5 years.

ABOUT ONTIRA COMMUNICATIONS

Ontira empowers transit operators with solutions that enhance customer communications. Providing Automated Traveler Information Systems (ATIS) technology since 1984, Ontira has earned a reputation for reliable and user-friendly multimedia applications and superior customer service. Ontira's information solutions enable transit users across North America and Australia to access traveler information via telephone, Internet, kiosk, fax, wireless technology and digital signage. Ontira is a subsidiary of TranSched Systems Ltd.



ONTIRA CUSTOMERS SAY...

"The Ontira Communications IVR and real-time automated trip booking solution has provided BlueGO with a seamless tool that has increased ridership and rider satisfaction to the benefit of Lake Tahoe's environment. The kiosk based real-time trip booking has reduced the need for live dispatch resources, led to a significant increase in operating efficiencies, and decreased wait times of the door-to-door service."

*Nick Haven
Senior Transportation Planner
Tahoe Regional Planning
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2/2

