

Case Study

» *DALLAS AREA RAPID TRANSIT*



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SYNOPSIS

Ontira's Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system provides 24/7 access to paratransit customer information and ride requests in the Dallas area. It is estimated that the IVR system has saved in excess of \$274,000 in labor costs from 2004 through 2006.

THE NEED

In a short period of time, the landscape in the transit industry changed when the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990. For public transportation providers, demand-response services for people with disabilities became as important as fixed route services for the mainstream public. The Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART), like many other agencies of that era, was looking to improve its paratransit operations in light of these changes.

With advances in technology, DART considered incorporating an IVR system to enhance client access to information. There is great potential for cost savings in paratransit operations, because the per passenger subsidy for providing one paratransit trip can be as much as 12 times greater than that of one fixed route trip. DART's paratransit subsidy per passenger is \$47.07, compared to \$3.85 for fixed route. However, a significant hurdle DART faced was the negative experience it had with a previous IVR system. The new IVR vendor would have to overcome any biases against this technology, from both internal and external stakeholders.

THE SOLUTION

DART originally selected Ontira to automate its paratransit ride information in 1997. Since then, DART's Automated Traveler Information System (ATIS) has evolved from simple functionality to full automation. The following is a description of DART's solution and how it has advanced with technology to meet customer needs.

1997: Ontira implemented HandyLine, a paratransit IVR solution that allowed customers to confirm or cancel any previously booked trips. The IVR also answered all calls and distributed them internally. The convenience of HandyLine enabled customers to access their ride information via touch-tone telephone, 22 hours per day.

1999: During the monthly trip subscription renewal period, callers often had to wait in queues for the next available agent. Ontira's Booking Messenger, installed in 1999, allowed callers to leave subscription renewal information (i.e. repeated trips such as ones going from home to doctor) for agents to process later. Booking Messenger collected and stored a combination of digital and analog information: callers could leave voice messages or enter numbers via touch-tone (for dates, addresses, account numbers, etc.) By automating subscription renewals, it alleviated some of the call center's workload during peak hours. During off-peak hours, agents can then attend to requests entered through the Booking Messenger in sequence.

2000: DART's IVR solution was upgraded to an automated booking module of HandyLine, known at DART as X-Press Booking (XPB). The first of its kind in North America, XPB is a fully automated booking system that enables DART's paratransit customers to easily schedule trips by phone 24/7. HandyLine connects directly with DART's scheduling system and trips are booked automatically, without the need for staff assistance. It also offers callers the convenience of being able to select from previous trip history or a personalized list of trips. XPB can handle the majority of caller preferences and trip requirements, including any mobility aids or companions they may be bringing on the trip.



ONTIRA CUSTOMERS SAY...

"For five years, we have been using Ontira's MessageCenter for same day paratransit bus arrival notifications and recertification reminders. During this time, our no-show rates have dropped from 7% to 3%, and cancel rates from 22% to 15%. We are planning an upgrade that will automatically notify passengers with changes in estimated pick up times. This will reduce the amount of time our schedulers currently spend manually calling passengers with changes. Along with a reminder of next day trips, the enhancement will also give our passengers the opportunity to cancel their rides the day before."

*Steven Ponte
Chief Operating Officer
Eastern Contra Costa
Transit Authority*

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RESULTS

DART Paratransit Services strived to become more efficient and responsive to customer needs, and it succeeded in doing so by becoming the first in North America to implement automated booking for paratransit services. DART set an example for using technology to enhance operations and customer service, and it was delighted to be a pioneer in the industry.

Ontira's confirm/cancel module has had a remarkable impact on operations. In only a couple of years since the implementation of confirm/cancel features, the figures compiled in 2000 showed that there were over 170,000 trip confirmations and cancellations via the IVR in one year, which translated to over 2,800 staff hours saved. From a customer service perspective, agents are able to focus their time on those who require more personal attention. The system also meets the diverse needs of the Dallas community by providing access in both English and Spanish.

Currently, 3.72% of DART's scheduled trips are booked through the XPB module. The system is so dependable that DART decided in 2004 not to staff its call centers on weekends and holidays. Instead, the agency has been confidently accepting trip requests via Ontira's automated booking functionality, coupled with a voicemail feature. With cost savings from the weekend call center closures, DART is able to reallocate its labor costs to provide more personalized customer assistance and to improve road service.

The measurable costs savings are impressive. As of late 2006, David Sheppard, DART's Senior Specialist of Management Services stated, "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."

LOOKING FORWARD

To keep its technology current, DART is looking to upgrade to the latest HandyLine features, including Ontira's MessageCenter, which can provide customers with real-time estimated time of arrival (ETA) notifications and other message types. Such ETA notifications have been shown to reduce no-show rates by providing customers with timely reminders.

A HandyLine upgrade would also provide DART with web-based Control Center for administrative functions, which includes text-to-speech (TTS) capability for phrase recordings. DART would like to re-record its IVR menu because the current one contains a mix of different voices. The TTS engine would significantly reduce the time and costs associated with creating an entirely new menu, as it will convert textual information into speech that closely resembles a natural voice.

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...

"Ontira has been providing stable and robust Automated Traveler Information Systems to BC Transit since 1987. They have always been easy to work with and strongly focused on customer service. Ontira's systems provide transit information to 10 communities in our province. Recently we worked with them and their partners to develop the continent's first ever bus arrival notification system for paratransit services in Victoria. Their work is a cornerstone to our customer service."

*Mike Davis
Manager, Planning & Scheduling
BC Transit*

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