

The Computer Revolution Comes to Rural America — But are rural transit managers ready?

by Mike Henson

Software vendors often voice their concerns about rural transit managers not being able to run or understand their software. With a decade of experience as a rural operator, training rural operators and working with rural operators, I have to agree that this is often the case. However, the reason for this has more to do with vendors not understanding the rural market than with the rural market being technophobic.

Uniquely Rural Transit

As rural transit managers, we are faced with a basic difference in paradigm from our urban brothers and sisters. In the rural paratransit arena, the questions are not about the 3/4 mile ADA corridor, run cutting, GPS (Global Positioning Systems), full color on-screen map displays with real-time updates of vehicle positions, real-time computer links between base and vehicles, magnetic cards for passengers, and all those other, albeit marvelous, technological wonders. The issues in rural paratransit are much more basic — who is scheduled for pickup today, can we do it, who pays for it, how can I keep track of it?

Not surprisingly, a large part of this difference arises from disparities in funding. The rural transit operator is usually first and foremost something other than a transit operator. Most rural transit systems are also Area Agencies on Aging, Centers for Independent Living, Sheltered Workshops or one of myriad other social services agencies. Since few agencies can survive just providing rural public transit, transit is just another component of a multi-service agency — not the primary mission as it is in an urban transit system.

Similarly, the actual transit manager was (before becoming transit manager) something else within that or a similar agency. A counselor, case manager, workshop supervisor, resident assistant and so forth. Thus, computer proficiency was never a corporate survival skill like it is in most for-profit companies of similar size or in urban, dedicated transit agencies with generous federal funding and readily available local match funds.

Transit software vendors need to understand something about these agencies and the type of personality such work attracts. Often in rural agencies, transportation is

viewed only as a means to an end — getting a meal delivered, getting a client to a mandatory agency sponsored rehabilitation or work adjustment service, etc. This focus is what attracts many people to these types of agencies — working with people directly, one-on-one human interplay, and helping others has little to do with the technological capabilities of the employee.

Tapping the Rural Market

For software vendors to really open up the rural markets they will have to shift their paradigm. In the rural setting, usually there is a single vehicle likely to be in the area where the passenger lives on a given day, and that vehicle can either provide the trip or it cannot. End of story.

The typical rural transit manager has probably never done more to install software than pop a disk in drive A: and type SETUP. She/he has probably never spent more on software than \$299 for an office suite and has probably never edited a BAT, CFG or INI file — nor has any desire to do so.

So, what can software vendors do to tap the rural market — for certainly the rural market is largely untapped and does have some funds to spend to automate and understands the productivity enhancements automation offers.

First, recognize the level of technological knowledge of the operator. Rural operators are not incapable of learning technology. However, most rural operators, if they hold a degree, hold it in social work, psychology or education. In short, software must be simple and intuitive to install and operate.

Second, recognize that the basic functions of the software are all that the rural operator usually needs. Capabilities for run cutting, GPS, real time uplinks, automated scheduling and so forth are merely overkill which frustrate the typical user and inflate the purchase price.

The rural operator usually needs to track only basic demographic data about the client, the Medicaid number, emergency contact and medical conditions, location and many potential funding sources who will pay for various types of trips.

They need to assign routine or standing order trips to known vehicles. Usually, demand trips are also assigned to known vehicles since that will be the only vehicle to be in that client's vicinity during the day.

Batch or fully automated scheduling and interactive trip-by-trip scheduling offers little benefit to most rural operators and serves only to inflate the cost and unnecessarily complicate the operator's perceptions of the product, as well as create unrealistic expectations about such capabilities. Only basic trip suspension, cancellation, and verification functions are required.

The reporting capabilities of the product, both management and accounting, should be extremely strong, yet easy and intuitive to learn and use. Rural operators, as multi-service agencies, usually require much more flexible reporting and billing capabilities than urban operators. Windows© based, structured query language (SQL) and open database connectivity (ODBC) programs offer many advantages for the novice user. The ability to output to ASCII files is also important for interchange of data with other agency programs. Maintenance and backup functions should be kept to a minimum and kept simple. The capability for timed routines should be included so that these functions can be set to run after hours and on weekends.

As many of you have gathered by now, a modular approach to program design is most amenable to accomplishing these goals. With a modular approach, these basic capabilities can be offered at a price which will be palatable to the typical rural operator. And remember, since the person (not usually plural) responsible for operating this system will change about every two years, really good context sensitive help is essential. For example, pressing <F1> while highlighting the Schedule a Trip menu option should explain what scheduling a trip means, and why providing certain information about that trip request is essential to the software, as well as the keystrokes necessary to accomplish it and how to undo it if you make a mistake.

An upgrade path from single user to network version is a nice selling point — like how Automated Business Solutions offers you a credit toward the network version if you buy their single user version. Most low cost products are single user and most high cost products are network versions with not much filling the gap in between.

What about price? Where is the rural operator's perception of break even? From years of talking with other rural operators, I can tell you that about \$2,500 for a single user version (package price and training, if necessary, included) is the most with which rural operators are comfortable. They may go for a higher priced product, but only if they have a separate grant available which they don't need or can't use for vehicle purchases. Maintenance fees should be held under \$1500 per year for a network version , \$500 for the single user version.

Vendors must down size their products so that the price can be down sized as well. Remove the bells and whistles and offer a basic product with basic needed features along with an upgrade path to network versions should the customer grow. Offer add-on modules (modular programming) for interactive scheduling, batch scheduling, re-coding and duplicating records, geocoding, etc., and keep maintenance fees low enough that the agency sees the expenditure as insurance.

My Picks

There are a number of good products on the market. At the CTAA-member Mountain Empire Older Citizens we selected PtMS (Paratransit Management System) by Automated Business Solutions back in 1991. We felt that the strong accounting capability, the ability to handle many different funding sources for trips, the two ad hoc report writing modules we received with our purchase, the ability to upgrade later to the multi-user (network) version if we needed to, and the large number of FTE (full time equivalent) Tech Support positions were real selling points.

The program has constantly been upgraded and well-supported, so we have been very pleased with our purchase, upgrading to the network version less than 18 months after purchase due to service growth. We currently handle 500-800 one-way trips per day with the system, including public transit, Medicaid, multiple fee-for-service contracts, OAA Title III services and many others. PtMS is available as a single user version for about \$5000, network version at around \$20,000.

Recently, I viewed the DOS version that CTAA vendor-member TRAPEZE had available at the Virginia State Transit Expo and Community Transportation Association of Virginia Conference. While available in a multi-user version only at about \$20,000, it also appeared to be a strong product, as did the (CTAA vendor-member) COMSIS system (again about \$20,000) which I viewed at CTAA's EXPO two years ago.

Under \$5000 the choices become fewer. PSP, Dispatch Manager, and TMS are, the last I knew, still available and under \$1500. Remember, however, you get what you pay for, and of course you should contact the vendors for the current actual prices of their products. In cases where a demo is available, the vendor will often send one to you, and several are loaded on the MEOC BBS at (540) 523-4209 in the Transit area.

So, what is the future for rural transit software? Bright, I think — for those vendors who can retool their products, who can shift their paradigm, who can realize that rural operators are not just urban operators who happen to be out in the country but are instead a whole new market segment who must be understood to be sold.