



Photo courtesy of Brad Zweerink, *The Reporter*, Vacaville, Ca.

Christian Talsing wants to see his peers on the bus, and he's giving them a voice in mobility matters.

Today's young people are tomorrow's community and public riders. Recognizing both an important market and constituency for transit, many dedicated transit managers and advocates are using various approaches to examine young riders' needs, their developing attitudes about mobility, the decision-making skills they'll bring to adulthood and their impact on the future of community and public transportation. What follows are model profiles of how systems are serving the young riders in their community.

Today's communities wrestle with a number of challenges. Look just about anywhere in the country and you'll find a debate on development, a study of land use, a campaign for road building, a referendum on taxes. Communities are trying to make good decisions that will serve them now and in the future.

Young Riders: Community and Public Transportation's Next Generation

By Beth Wilson

Young Riders On Board

Area (by pop.)	% of Passengers 18 and Under
50,000 and under (rural)	21
50,000 - 200,000	19
200,000 - 500,000	15
500,000 - 1,000,000	9
1,000,000 +	10

Source: Public Transportation Fact Book, 55th Edition, March 2004, American Public Transportation Association

Every year a new group of decision makers enter the fray. While the demarcation line is undoubtedly blurred, they are teenagers one day and workers, commuters, tax payers, voters, property owners and parents the next. How they make the transition — what knowledge and experience they bring to the next frontier — will impact the community we all live in. When they've had positive experiences with community and public transportation, and, better yet, when they fully understand and appreciate the impact of mobility choices on themselves and their neighbors, young riders can become valuable advocates.

Young Riders Depend on Transit, Too

In a perfect world, all teenagers would know what Christian Tabing knows.

"We depend on the bus for everything — getting groceries, going to school, to the library," says Tabing of his family's transit use in the northern California hometown of Fairfield.

With a service area stretching from San Francisco's East Bay to Sacramento, Fairfield/Suisun Transit provides local bus service in Fairfield, Suisun City and Cordelia, intercity service within Solano County and express service between Fairfield, Vacaville, Davis, Sacramento and the Pleasant Hill BART station (across the Bay from San Francisco). Ridership reached nearly one million in 2003. During the school year, 25-30 percent of bus passengers are under 18 — primarily middle and high school students.

Tabing just turned 17. He's busy saving for college. His mother is unable to drive due to a medical condition, so he has grown up on transit.

He's aware of mobility needs in his community. And the growing traffic congestion and the air quality concerns. He views transit as an important force in combating these challenges, and wants

to see more of his peers boarding the bus.

"I want people to make transit a first choice," he says. "I want to see transit as part of my friends' daily routine. That way they're likely to use it in the future when they grow up and have to go to work."

Reaching that future scenario, he says, requires some work. The kind he and 14 other young people are doing as part of the City of Fairfield's Youth Commission. As an advisory board to City Council, the eight-year-old Commission brings the opinions and ideas of teens into the decision-making arena.

"The fact that we have a Youth Commission is unique," says Kevin Daughton, Transportation Manager for the City of Fairfield, of the teenage commissioners influencing decisions at City Hall. "It's the perfect conduit to that segment, to help us learn what needs we haven't met."

Daughton has been making regular visits to Youth Commission meetings, educating members about the transit system, its operations, its budget, its capacity constraints. He is working with members as they move forward on a transit monitoring program, assisting with a survey design. The process has been slowed as the City reviews new contract bids for service.

But Tabing says the teen mobility experience should be part of any selection process. And so he's out having conversations at bus stops and on the vehicles, in libraries and in the mall, talking with other teenagers in his community, documenting their experience on — and ideas about — transit, and cataloging the results for Fairfield/Suisun Transit.

Young Riders are seeking independence, he says, and improved transit connections will make that possible.

"They're able to meet friends, go to football practice," says Tabing. "And they don't have to depend on their parents. They feel more like individuals."

Daughton talks about a perfect world, where the transit system has sufficient resources to run more buses more places with more young people on board. The possibilities will be steered by future decisions.

"We're building new policy makers," he says



During the school year, nearly a third of Fairfield/Suisun Transit's passengers are under 18.



Photos courtesy of Fairfield/Suisun Transit

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of the Youth Commission's work. "Commissioner Tabing's diligence is important. Our entire community benefits from changes that serve young riders."

Their Future, Their Transit

On the other side of the country in southeast Virginia, young people are tackling similar issues. Growing congestion and air quality concerns fueled a 2002 referendum on raising the sales tax to fund several transportation projects in the region. Supporters hailed the opportunity for area communities to improve connections but opponents defeated the measure.

"There were big decisions being made," says Ross Kearney, Hampton Roads Transit spokesperson, of the challenges facing the region. "But nobody was asking kids what they thought. The kids in Hampton decided to do something. They decided to evaluate transit."

Hampton Roads Transit traverses an intracoastal waterway off the Chesapeake Bay, connecting the communities of Hampton, Newport News, Virginia Beach, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk and Chesapeake with 60 bus routes, demand-response service, express buses to Naval Station Norfolk and downtown Norfolk, a beach trolley and a paddlewheel ferry. A 7.5-mile light-rail line is in the pipeline.

The Hampton Youth Commission was formed in 1996, giving Hampton youth a voice in city decision making through 24 participating high-school students. Three members are actually employed as city staff, and two of those students work directly with the planning department.

"Getting around is a hot topic," says Hampton Coalition for Youth Director Cindy Carlson, of the Commission's decision to produce a youth survey. "Members asked their peers, 'Why don't you ride the

bus?' They said it was for old people. And we said, "Okay, we have a perception problem."

The Youth Commission met with transit leaders to share the full results: area youths were used to cars and unfamiliar with the bus; they weren't confident they could get where they wanted when they wanted; the fare seemed expensive.

"We recognize that youth are a vital market for public transportation," says Executive Director Michael Townes. "Hampton Roads Transit provides regular services to major destination points that the young adults frequent on a regular basis, and we need to make sure they know that. It's important that Hampton Roads Transit educate teens so they become familiar with public transportation and begin to use it on a



New advertising delivered an important message: HRT goes where the community's teens want to go.

Photos courtesy of Hampton Roads Transit

regular basis. Once they see how easy it is to go from one place to another, we're quite confident that they'll continue to use transit when they are grown. That's good for Hampton Roads Transit, and that's good for the community."

Hampton Roads Transit used the Commission's results to craft a pilot marketing program to deliver their message to the community's teenagers. The result was a multi-media strategy combining radio, television, Internet, promotions and special events.

“The TV ad showed friends going to the mall, to the beach. It showed how much fun they are having. It showed the bus going where young riders want to go,” says Kearney.

And it reached teens.

“Young people were talking about transit. They’d seen the ads. They knew the jingle,” says Carlson. “And the Youth Commission was proud that they had had an influence.”

Hampton Roads Transit saw teen ridership increase by 11,000 passengers in the first 30 days of the marketing campaign. By the end of the campaign, monthly teen ridership was peaking at 25,000.

“We found that teens were taking Hampton Roads Transit to the beaches, shopping malls, libraries, recreation centers and to their after-school and summer jobs,” says Townes. “They were even venturing beyond the usual Hampton Roads Transit service area and traveling to Colonial Williamsburg by transferring to the adjacent Williamsburg Area Transport system, which then connects them to the Busch Gardens and Water Country USA theme parks, as well.”

Hampton Roads Transit renewed its outreach efforts to the community’s teens in 2004, launching a new campaign touting the card-carrying benefits of the system’s U-18 youth farecard.

“The sooner you’re able to get to young adults and educate, the better. They are the future,” says Kearney.

Carlson concurs.

“[The campaign] instilled a different vision of transit,” she explains. “We’re engaging youth, building a constituency for the future.”

Reaching Out to Educate Young Riders

That future community support is why, says Jessica Lennon, supervisor with Dallas Area Regional Transit’s education outreach program, it’s vital for transit systems to reach out and educate young people.

“The whole attitude about public transportation begins early,” she says, explicating a strategy that connects with first graders and continues the education through high school.

DART’s Transit Education Outreach Program provides both classroom



Photo courtesy of Dallas Area Rapid Transit

Beyond ridership, DART views teenage passengers as key to economic development and an enhanced quality of life.

HRT saw a significant increase in teen ridership with an expansive and effective marketing campaign.



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instruction and hands-on transit tours in seven school districts, introducing students to the 13-city multimodal system. DART connects Dallas and 12 surrounding communities over a 700-square-mile area with 130 bus routes, demand-response service, 44 miles of light rail and — in partnership with the Fort Worth Transportation Authority — 35 miles of commuter rail.

With guidance from Lennon, students discuss the impact of community and public transit on their environment, their economy and their quality of life. Recognizing that parents play an important role in mobility decisions, DART has reached out to them with a safety message.

“We want parents to feel comfortable with their kids riding transit, letting that 13- or 14-year-old ride the bus over to the mall with their friends,” explains Lennon.

As concerns about youth mobility surfaced in the City of Irving in the late 1990s, the Irving Citizen’s DART Advisory Committee — a partnership of citizens, city councilmembers and DART board members — explored new outreach efforts. When a pilot program at an area middle school took shape, school district representatives and the school’s principal suggested that the transit system make itself visible at school events, setting up information tables and meeting with parents. DART went a step further. And so was born DART Day.

“Parents had the opportunity to come out and talk with DART. It is extremely, extremely important to reach the parents,” says Lennon of helping everyone reach a comfort level.

Making transit a choice for teens requires effective attention to parents’ needs. Are kids on transit going places I want my kids to go? Are they safe? Can they ask for assistance? Who else is on these vehicles? DART Day provided parents an opportunity to meet people behind the transit system, ask questions and learn how connections can serve both

teens’ needs and parents’ schedules.

DART’s efforts take a slightly different slant with teenage audiences. These individuals, says Lennon, are fast becoming young adults interested in exploring jobs, careers, their future. Education efforts often center around transit careers.

“And in speaking with them about jobs, we ask about riding the system. We tell them, “From a stakeholder perspective, this system belongs to you.”

Such educational gatherings often take place at DART headquarters, in the board room.

“We talk about the DART Board of Directors and their role. We talk about stakeholders,” explains Lennon. “We tell them, “Transit may not be for everyone, but it is an option. Life is about options.”

And the teenagers ask questions.



Photo courtesy of Dallas Area Rapid Transit

Lots of questions.

“These kids are very smart. Sometimes they even stump us. They’re interested in alternative fuels. They have operational questions,” says Lennon. “They see the microphone. They see the lights. And we say, ‘In 10 years, you may be here making policy.’”

Many of the school districts have internship programs, and many of the

kids chose to work with or shadow someone at DART. Lennon has a student working with her every semester, usually a high school senior bound for college. These young riders have the opportunity to sit in on the machinations of all DART departments, attend meetings, go to events ... and ride transit with a free DART pass.

“They learn about DART. Then, they’re out promoting DART,” says Lennon. “‘Transit is cool!’ I had an intern that used the term cool a lot.”

The experience has a significant impact on young adults as they plan for their future, says Debbie Shugart with the Technology Internship Program at Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District. And they bring that experience back to their classrooms.

“The ripple effect has been tremendous,” she explains. “The school district gains young people coming back to talk peer-to-peer.”

While Shugart discusses transportation options with students pursuing internship opportunities, she says students themselves teach the long-lasting lessons of transit.

“In the computer lab, I’ll hear kids discussing a concert or going to the West End. And someone says, ‘Here, let’s look up DART.’ They’re teaching each other how to use the system.”

Lennon says many youths in the community ride DART to school. They’re also connecting with DART on field trips, heading to recreational outings on DART, taking light rail to a museum and more.

“Reaching out to the community is important because it establishes us as a viable community partner,” stresses Lennon. “We would not be where we are today without the good will, without the support, without the votes.”

And teenagers, says Lennon, will eventually be adults casting votes.

“Teens are our future. They are our current ridership, and they are our future ridership,” she says. “Our ultimate goal is that the positive feeling they have [about us] as young people will be the positive feeling they have as adults, as stakeholders, as politicians. We want them in our corner.”

There’s a bigger picture here beyond ridership figures.

“Their future support of transit means an enhanced quality of life for the community. It means economic development. It means mobility,” says Lennon. “Young people get that message on their level. And that’s our job — that they do get the message.”

A System for Young Riders

Valley Metro is working to make certain that youth in their community get the message, too.

Phoenix is the sixth largest city in the country, with a population approaching 1.3 million. The Greater Phoenix metropolitan area — expanding out nearly 9,000 square miles — has grown almost 60 percent since 1990, and is projected to reach 3.3 million in population next year. The area is characterized by suburbs of more than 100,000 that have maintained double-digit growth rates. Instead of a dense central business



Students from Dallas area schools get a behind-the-scenes look at the multimodal system.

area, retail, offices, entertainment and housing are spread out.

There are obviously a lot of people here trying to get a lot of places. And in the future, there will be a lot more. In the future, Valley Metro tells young riders, there will be important choices to make.

“We try to get to them before they get that driver’s license,” stresses Dolores Nolan, transit education supervisor with Valley Metro. “We want to teach them that transit is an option.”

And a growing one. Valley Metro contracts with a number of public and private operators to deliver local, express, circulator and demand-response service across expansive Maricopa County. In 2000, Valley voters approved a sales tax measure to steer more investment into transit, including a new light-rail system that will expand the region’s community and public transportation options. That means more connections for Phoenix area young people, as well. Ensuring that such important messages reach them, Valley Metro created staff positions charged with school outreach. Nolan visits grades 7-12.

She talks with young audiences



Valley Metro is helping Phoenix area young people make important choices.

about the economic, environmental and social issues surrounding mobility choices. She discusses the effects their choices have on their own daily lives. And she introduces transit — and the facts about transit — fares, planning trips, how to ride, system policies, safety. Outreach goes beyond the classroom, as Nolan visits after-school programs, summer programs and park and recreation sites.

Although there are many area teens that might ride to high school on a Valley Metro bus, Nolan says most teens have limited ideas about transit.

“They know it’s for someone else. Maybe for someone downtown. Someone going to work,” she explains of their early conceptions. “We’re trying to change that. We’re telling them this system is for them, not just working people.”

The shopping mall, Bank One Ballpark, the Phoenix Art Museum, the library, the Arizona State Fair, Papago Park, Big Surf waterpark, local schools, movie theaters, the Arizona Science Center. Valley Metro is going where they want to go, Nolan assures them.

Getting the message across requires knowing the market they’re after and employing some effective marketing techniques.

“We talk to them about being stuck at home. ‘Maybe you want to go to the mall, go see friends. You can get wherever you want to go whenever you want to go,’” says Nolan, echoing the all-important independence angle.

Winning over the teenage crowd requires winning over their parents.

“We try to be at lots of [school] orientations,” says Nolan. “A big concern for parents is safety, and we address that.”

Parents have the opportunity to learn what their teenagers are learning about transit — planning trips, traveling with a buddy, bringing any concerns to the driver’s attention.

Valley Metro wants the community, including teens, to develop a sense of ownership of the transit system. To understand that the community — and that includes them — invests resources to fuel vital connections.

“I tell them, ‘Everytime you buy something, you pay taxes,’” says Nolan, making the investment connection for her audience. “You own this system.”

Four years ago, Valley Metro came up with an idea to tap into metro Phoe-

nix area teens' ideas about mobility, and to get more high school students involved in public transit. The annual Design a Bus Wrap contest has been a big hit. Each year Nolan and her colleague visit local school districts to promote the contest and encourage educators to find creative ways to work transit into their curriculum.

High-school students from four area school districts participated in this year's contest. The winning theme and design, *The Pollution Solution*, was the brainchild of a local high school junior.

Previous winning designs have drawn attention to other themes: *A Blast from the Past*, *Save on Gas* delivered a cost-saving message. *Valley Metro into the Light*, *Valley Metro into the Night* illustrated the extended hours of many routes.

Nolan says the program aims to change the image teens might hold of transit. And it does so with teens developing and delivering the message. The design process enables them to make connections — between transit and the environment, transit and access, transit and their wallet. The vehicles become canvasses for their own awareness and insight. And they are officially on board.

Getting Youth Involved

In the summer of 2003, King County Metro Transit delivered its mobility message to young people through a new medium: young people.

"We didn't just promote a youth pass," explains Kelly Lindsey, marketing specialist with the Seattle-based system. "We got youth involved."

Metro Transit carries 100 million riders annually on its buses, trolleys and streetcars, connecting the communities that lay between the Puget Sound and the Cascade Range. Its vanpool program is the largest publicly owned operation in the country, with more than 700 vans making nearly three million trips each year. Some segments of King County's population, however, have been more difficult to reach.

"There's a huge untapped market," says Lindsey of potential young

passengers. "But it's not an easy market to reach. Many of these kids are driven around by others. Or they just don't know about the bus."

Partners for Smart Commuting — a coalition of local, regional and state government agencies in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada and Montana — aims to raise public awareness of transportation alternatives to alleviate traffic congestion, pollution and wasted energy. Its *move it!* program was developed to educate middle school- and high school-age youth about their mobility choices and how they affect their communities. The demonstration campaign came to Issaquah and Sammamish, Washington, where King County Metro Transit partnered with 14 teens to create the Youth Transportation Action Council.

Meeting weekly for more than three months, students studied mobility choices and discussed their impact on communities and the people that live in them. The Issaquah/Sammamish area, located about 15 miles east of Seattle, is characterized by high-income families, many with a stay-at-home parent. As in many suburban areas across the country, children here rely on parents to drive them to their activities.

"There was definitely a learning curve," she explains. "Many of these kids had never even been on a bus."

Teens learned to read time tables, plan trips and call Rider Information. In addition to guidance from Metro, the City of Issaquah Resource Conservation office, King County Health Department and Cascade Bicycle Club got involved. The next step was sharing what they had learned with their peers.

Youth councilmembers visited various community events and school cafeterias, manning information tables, explaining interactive maps and providing copies of an information booklet they created themselves: *Freedom of Movement!*

"This was kids educating kids," says Lindsey. "They created materials in their own language, not in adult commuter

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language.”

Independence and the environment were strong themes. Along with the meaty stuff, students enticed visitors to their tables with promotional giveaways.

“We told students they could do this however they wanted. They said they needed to offer free stuff.”

And so their peers left the information tables with not only helpful information but helpful reminders — bright-colored pencils, pens, clip magnets and handy caribeener clips with the *move it!* logo.

The young riders’ outreach effort reached 2,000 people. In its aftermath came interest from local newspapers, a local cable television station and both city councils.

“We’re a rapidly developing area,” explains Sammamish City Councilmember Michele Petitti, of a five-year-old city that is striving to connect a collection of neighborhoods. “Our goal is to increase mobility, to create a walkable community with alternative ways of getting around.”

That’s particularly important in Sammamish, she explains, where nearly one-third of the 37,000 residents are under the age of 18.

“Kids are looking for a way to get down to the commercial areas, to go to the movies, to a place to eat or to the shopping areas, and not have to deal with all their parents coordinating rides,” says Petitti.

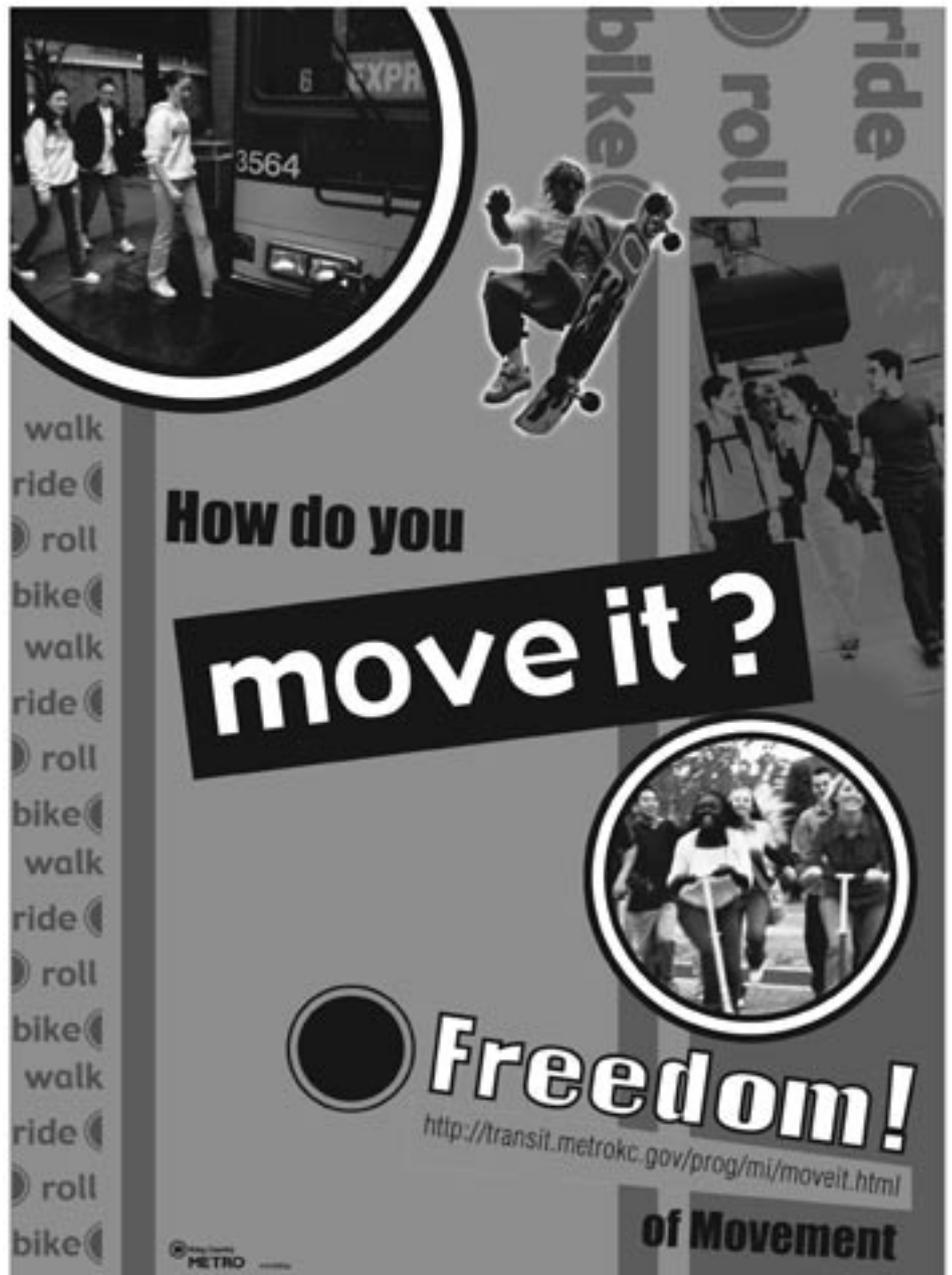
The exploration of public trans-

sit through projects like *move it!*, she points out, is in its infancy here, and is up against a strong and prevalent attitude: it’s cool to be in a car.

“And many parents support this philosophy,” laments Petitti. “It would be great if our kids can start saying, ‘Hey, let’s take the bus.’”

That’s the potential of the *move it!* program, she says, because teens tend to respond to their own peers.

The *move it!* booklet is now distributed through local parks and recreation



King County Metro Transit and the *move it!* program let young riders deliver their own mobility message to their peers.

MTV, the Internet and Greyhound

The national interstate carrier stays popular with today's young riders

Ah, spring. And a young student's thoughts turn to ... Spring Break, naturally.

"Spring Break is a big, big time for us," says Toby Purdy, Greyhound's senior vice president of marketing. "Students want to go to their favorite places, and Greyhound is taking them there."

The youth segment — riders age 18-24 — make up 30 percent of Greyhound's ridership. And the numbers are rising, as Greyhound forges into Internet advertising, on-line ticketing, campus outreach and ads on MTV and ESPN.

The 21st Century is witnessing the venture into new media. But the message hasn't changed much. As Purdy stresses, the Greyhound brand has to be consistent to all their consumers. Delivering the message to youth, however, has required new strategies.

"Their behaviors are different. They've grown up with video games, the Internet, and, now, Tivo. There's been a paradigm shift in how you reach this important segment," he explains. "The ads [targeting young adults] are fun and energetic. They feature youth, people that teens can relate to. And they can say, 'That's me traveling. They're going to visit a friend or going to a wedding, and that's what I do.'"

These are the last-minute planners, says Purdy of teenagers and college students. The spontaneous travelers. Greyhound is working to better understand their lifestyle, their behavior and their needs.

"We've received good feedback from our young riders about what they want," he says.

"Teens are very open, especially if you hold a roundtable and provide free pizza!"

A major insight gleaned from conversations with teens, according to Purdy, is the wide reach of the Internet with the youth market. Greyhound is able to track links between Internet ads, website visits and on-line ticket purchases, the latter continuing to



grow by double digits each quarter.

Greyhound also reaches young people with grassroots marketing — taking their transit message directly to college campuses.

"An important subsegment is college

students," says Purdy. "Those young adults that are looking to get away for the weekend, to go see family and friends."

And, being students, they need the trip to fit their budget. Greyhound offers student discounts and special promotions all geared toward the cost-conscious young rider. In certain northeastern metropolitan areas, Greyhound operates routes designed to get students home from school on weekends and back to school on Sunday. CampusLink buses pick up passengers right on campus.

"Forty-two percent of our first time riders come from the youth segment," says Purdy. "And they're heavy repeaters. They ride once, and then twice, and again and again."

In addition to making connections to destinations, Greyhound is helping many youth connect with careers in the transit industry. Partnering with universities, Greyhound offers a Terminal Management Trainee Program — an opportunity for youth to explore every aspect of the business while on the job at Greyhound.

In a very different community service, Greyhound has partnered with the National Runaway Switchboard to help troubled youth reconnect and return home. Through the *Home Free Program*, the National Runaway Switchboard helps runaways and guardians communicate while Greyhound makes the travel arrangements. For kids under 15, Greyhound will also provide a companion with a free ticket. Initiated in October 1995, Greyhound just provided their 10,000th free ride home.

departments and schools, and is available on the *move it!* website (<http://transit.metrokc.gov/prog/mi/moveit.html>).

"We're trying to help kids develop habits earlier, to not be vested in the car culture," says Lindsey. "People who take transit early on are more likely to take transit in the future."

Transit becomes familiar, part of the community landscape, part of the policy dialogue, part of the development strategy.

"These teens are not too far away from being in the sphere of influence," says Gretchen Roosevelt, supervisor of King County Metro Transit Sales and Marketing, who also worked with the *move it!* team. "We want to make public transportation part of their lexicon early on." 🚌