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David Sullivan

VP of Planning and Technology



ABOUT TRANSIT IN GOOGLE MAPS

Transit in Google Maps provides public transportation information in multiple languages in over a dozen countries worldwide. It is a cost-effective, and user-friendly tool that can act as a “discovery portal” for users unfamiliar with an area’s transit system, as well as an added convenience for season transit travelers. It is fully integrated with Google Maps and makes use of its various features such as real-time traffic, street-level images, walking directions, and business listings. Transit in Google Maps is also compatible with screen reads for users with visual impairments.

ABOUT YOUTUBE

YouTube is the world’s most popular online video community, allowing millions of people to discover, watch and share originally created videos. YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small. YouTube, LLC is based in San Bruno, Calif., and is a subsidiary of Google Inc.

Hampton Roads Transit improves customer service and enhances web marketing efforts with Transit in Google Maps, Analytics, YouTube, Gadgets, Calendar and Picasa.

The agency

Hampton Roads Transit (HRT) is a regional provider of public transportation serving seven Virginia cities: Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach. While it currently provides mainly bus service, HRT plans to launch a light rail system in 2010. The agency, whose CEO chairs the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), employs nearly 900 people.



Septus Dennis of HRT helping bus riders plan a trip using Google Maps

Challenges

Like all transit agencies, HRT wants to promote public transit use while offering the best service possible. As a result, the agency is always looking for ways to communicate more effectively with existing riders, potential riders, and the citizenry it serves.

Solutions

As part of its efforts to improve the ways it communicates with the public, HRT has implemented a number of Google solutions.

Perhaps most significantly, in 2007 HRT began using Transit in Google Maps, integrating its schedule and route information with Google Maps. Now that information is instantly available to the millions of people who use Google Maps and Google Maps for Mobile on the go every day, as well as being accessible right from the HRT website, gohrt.com. Furthermore, since agencies can use Transit in Google Maps free of charge, HRT is improving its customer service with very little in the way of new costs.

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David Sullivan, VP of Planning and Technology

HRT has also turned to a variety of other Google products to enhance its web marketing efforts. It began using Google Analytics to gain a better understanding of what was working – and what wasn’t – on its website. The agency embedded Google Calendar on the site to provide visitors with richer content in the form of a community calendar, and it turned to YouTube to help in its public-outreach efforts. According to David Sullivan, HRT’s Vice President for Planning and Technology, “It makes good business sense, because Google’s bandwidth is being used, not ours. And it’s easy to implement.”

ABOUT GADGETS

Gadgets are mini-applications that can be placed on iGoogle, computer desktops, and millions of web sites across the world. Gadgets can give millions of users the information they want, when they want it, and where they want it - all with your brand front and center. Develop a gadget and your branded content can be sent, for free, across the Internet.

ABOUT ANALYTICS

Google Analytics helps you find out what keywords attract your most desirable prospects, what advertising copy pulled the most responses, and what landing pages and content make the most money for you.

ABOUT CALENDAR

Google Calendar offers many ways to create and share content other than the web interface that we all know and love. Developers can leverage the Google data protocol to build applications that access all the functionality of Google Calendar. You can add Google's familiar look and feel to your site by embedding Google Calendars and published events. Or put your mark on the Google interface by creating Calendar Gadgets that users can add to their own Google Calendars!

ABOUT PICASA

Picasa Web Albums is the fast and easy way to put your photos online so you can start sharing. Use it with the Picasa software to upload entire albums of high quality photos in a click of the software's "Web Album" button, or use your normal web browser to add pics. Each account gets 1GB (and counting!) of free storage - that's enough to post and share around 4,000 standard resolution photos.

Results

HRT launched Transit in Google Maps with much less effort than it would have taken to develop a similar solution in-house. As a result, today HRT riders can find the schedule and route information they need more quickly and easily than ever before.

Since launching Transit in Google Maps, the HRT website has enjoyed a sustained increase in traffic. In May 2007, before the agency turned to Google, the HRT site attracted just over 100,000 page views. In May 2008, after the implementation, page views on the site were up by more than 60%, to more than 165,000 - and the page hosting the Transit in Google Maps trip planner accounted for nearly 7% of those page views. HRT is so pleased with the trip planner that it recently added the tool to the home page of gohrt.com.

Transit in Google Maps has also helped HRT enhance and streamline its customer service efforts. Customer service representatives use it to provide detailed, up-to-date information to people contacting the agency by phone - and thanks to Transit in Google Maps, new HRT customer service reps are able to provide callers with quality information on their first day, rather than spending weeks or months ramping up. Finally, while it used to take HRT employees six to eight hours to create a new print transit schedule - something they'd have to do for 47 separate routes, two to three times each per year - now, thanks to the timetable publisher [<http://code.google.com/p/timetablepublisher>] tool, an open-source application that complements Transit in Google Maps and was developed by TriMet [trimet.org], a transit agency in Portland, OR, it takes just minutes to update a schedule. Says Sullivan, "Now we can concentrate on improving our services rather than spending all that time doing scut work like proofreading."

An additional, unexpected benefit for HRT has been a PR boon that Sullivan calls "the Google effect." He explains, "Public transit in the area is not always well regarded, so we got a positive public image from associating with Google."

Says Sullivan, "Traditional IT managers tend to have an 'if we didn't develop it, it's no good' attitude, but I can't understand how a transit agency wouldn't want to be on Google Maps. And if you want to be agile and adaptable, using web-based products is smart - you don't have massive investments that you're saddled with for years."

After seeing the value of Transit in Google Maps, HRT began creating a related Google Gadget that it plans to offer to other agencies looking to put interactive transit and driving information on their website. "We're using the default Google Transit gadget as a base, and tweaking it for our needs," says Sullivan.

HRT has also seen significant benefits from the other Google solutions: YouTube is an important tool for communicating with the public - posting footage of a construction project ground-breaking ceremony, for instance, as well as simulations of what new transit construction projects are going to look and feel like for riders and their communities when they're completed. HRT has turned to Google Analytics to help optimize the HRT website, and implementing Google Calendar for community events and Picasa were simple ways to add further value for citizens and their own employees. Picasa now serves as HRT's photo library, the place HRT employees go to find images to use in reports, presentations, and other documents; says Sullivan, "Our intranet now links to a private Picasa site. We did it in an afternoon."

