

Small Towns and Rural Areas

April 27, 2005

Available exclusively to Best Workplaces for CommutersSM, Phone Forums provide cutting-edge information on a range of topics related to commuter benefits. Moderated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), these forums feature experts on key topic areas.

On April 27, 2005, Best Workplaces for CommutersSM hosted a phone forum to discuss successful commuter benefits programs in small towns and rural areas. Kevin Tingley, EPA forum moderator, provided a brief introduction.

Until 1990, rural areas had been slowly losing population. Since then, however, population has increased in nearly every rural county in the United States. Changes in the economy, improvements in telecommunications, and desire for a different life style than is available in cities and suburbs have driven people back into rural areas. This increase has led to rural congestion. Antiquated transportation infrastructure has not been able to keep up with increased traffic, and residents of rural areas tend to resist the idea of giving up car commuting. Urban solutions for congestion such as rail and bus systems often are not suitable or efficient for use in rural areas, so new ideas are needed to make commuter benefits programs successful.

Featured Speakers

*Karen Hollingsworth
Education and Training Coordinator, Bellingham
Cold Storage, Bellingham, WA*

Bellingham Cold Storage is a family-owned and operated company, currently under its third generation of leadership. It is located on Puget Sound, 85 miles north of Seattle, Washington, and 55 miles south of Vancouver, British Columbia. Bellingham Cold Storage maintains a workforce of 125 full-time employees.

When Ms. Hollingsworth was assigned to coordinate a commuter program in 1999, she faced an uphill battle. The company's parking lot has 600 spaces, and parking is free for employees. Traffic congestion is also

minimal in the town of Bellingham. Because two of the prime motivators for commuters to leave their cars, parking expense and traffic avoidance, did not exist for her employees, she had to focus the marketing for her commuter program on different areas. She chose to promote alternative commuting—especially walking and cycling—as a way both to get exercise and to save the environment.

The commuter program enjoys extraordinary management support and commitment. The company's executives are often seen carpooling, walking, biking, and working compressed work schedules. They lead by example and encourage their employees to follow.

Even with a small budget, Ms. Hollingsworth has found ways to increase employee awareness and participation. She coordinates two "smart commuter contests" each year, rewarding employees who are particularly active in the commuting program with gift certificates to a popular local hardware store. Every employee who participates in alternative commuting also receives a box of Cracker Jack. The Cracker Jack is hand-delivered immediately before work breaks, so employees who do not receive it wonder why they didn't. They ask employees who did receive a box what they did to earn it, and so begin conversations about alternative commuting.

In order to make the program more accessible both to the English and Spanish speakers at the company, Ms. Hollingsworth and a small team named the commuting program the easily understandable "SMART Commuter Program." When speaking to employees, she does not refer to herself as an ETC (Employee Transportation Coordinator) because the acronym and its meaning are not readily understandable to the average employee. They also present all of their commuter program's marketing materials in both English and Spanish.

Ms. Hollingsworth ensures that employees feel as though they have ownership of their commuter options program. She has engaged employees throughout the company to help develop the commuting program. Through all of their efforts, employees who previously thought that the only way to get to work was by driving alone five days a week were exposed to a number of

different commuting options, including carpooling, walking to work, biking to work, and working compressed work schedules.

Noticing that many employees went to the gym either before or after work, Ms. Hollingsworth incorporated the message that traveling to work by bicycle or on foot could replace usual fitness routines. She also held several bike/walk to work days through the year. At one event, she highlighted an employee who rode more than 30 miles to work that day. The employee was over sixty years old, so the theme of the event became, "If Clyde can do it, you can too."

Ms. Hollingsworth and other Bellingham Cold Storage employees created a smart commuter award, called the BCSer Award, standing for Be Commute Smart, Environmentally Responsible. By using the company's acronym, BCS, and turning it into the basis for their commute award, Ms. Hollingsworth and her team made the award easily memorable and meaningful to the rest of the employees at the company.

The commute program changed the entire corporate culture at Bellingham Cold Storage. Now, at the top of every employee's timesheet is the question: "How did you get to work today?" Employees are reminded to think about their commuting method every time they leave work for the day. As a result of all Ms. Hollingsworth's and other contributing employees' efforts, the SMART Commuter program has been very successful. More than half of the company's 125 employees use alternative methods of commuting. Ms. Hollingsworth emphasized that she operates her program on quite a small budget - approximately \$350 per year.

Corey Krejcik
Business Development Manager, VPSI, Inc.
Formerly Commuter Assistance Center Manager,
Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, Collegeville, PA

Mr. Krejcik is an employee of VPSI, Inc., a nationwide provider of commuter vanpools and employee transportation services. His company contracted with Wyeth Pharmaceuticals in 2001 to oversee the development of a commuter program at a new Wyeth facility in Collegeville, Pennsylvania. Mr. Krejcik managed the

program for two and one-half years before passing it to another manager and moving to his new position.

The Collegeville worksite was originally located in Radnor, Pennsylvania - 12 miles closer to Philadelphia's highways and other transportation networks. To ensure that employees could get to work as efficiently and as easily as they had previously, Mr. Krejcik and his team had to find a way to make this new worksite just as accessible to employees as the original.

To meet the challenge, the team formed a commuter center and branded it "GreenWheels." This title helped define the program as environmentally focused and fun. Initially, the program focused on commuter vanpooling, carpooling, and a shuttle service that connected the Collegeville facility to the closest transit station and the Radnor worksite.

As the program evolved, the GreenWheels team saw the construction of a multi-use walking and cycling trail that traveled all the way from the Wyeth campus into central Philadelphia. Recognizing that use of the trail could be an additional commuting option, the team began to promote biking and walking as an alternative way to get to work. They founded the Foot and Pedal Commuter Club, which provides discounts at local bicycle stores as well as showers and lockers for cyclists and walkers.

The GreenWheels team established an intranet presence, ensuring that employees could get all the information that they need about commuting programs from their own computers. When the Best Workplaces for CommutersSM from the FORTUNE 500 began and Wyeth expanded its commuter benefits packages to other worksites, it was easy to transfer the information from the Collegeville intranet site to Wyeth's other participating worksites in North Carolina and New Jersey. Easy set-up allowed commuter teams to devote more time to developing customized programs that meet the needs of each worksite. Each of Wyeth's worksites has different commuting infrastructure available, so for each a different commuting program is appropriate. The Collegeville worksite, due to its relative proximity to mass transit, emphasizes its shuttle system. A worksite in Sanford, North Carolina, is near no public transit, and so more heavily promotes a vanpool subsidy.

Meredith Schuff
Office/Marketing Director, Campus Area
Transportation Management Association
(CATMA), Burlington, VT

Burlington, Vermont, is an urban city surrounded by very rural areas. CATMA's members include a large hospital (Fletcher Allen Health Care) two colleges (Champlain College and the University of Vermont) and the American Red Cross Blood Donor Center. Very few employees at these institutions work traditional 9-to-5 hours. Meredith and other members of the CATMA team devote a significant portion of their time identifying candidates for their programs and finding ways to best entice them to take advantage of the commuting options CATMA provides.

To help meet the community's needs, CATMA has partnered with the City of Burlington and the Chittenden County Transportation Authority (CCTA), the local transit provider, to develop a park-and-ride lot on the edge of the city with an express shuttle service to the CATMA institutions. The parking lot and the shuttle are both free to CATMA institutions employees and students, saving them money on parking and reducing congestion within the city. In the first year of the park-and-ride program, from September 2002 to September 2003, average ridership was 3,000 trips per month. By early 2005, that number had risen to over 6,000 trips per month.

CATMA's Bike-Walk Bucks program has also found success. This program rewards commuters who bike or walk to and from work two or more days per week on a regular basis. When commuters sign up for the program, they receive a card upon which they indicate the days they bike or walk to and from work. For every four consecutive weeks that commuters walk or bike to and from work, they can earn a gift certificate to downtown Burlington area businesses. Participants who are active in Bike-Walk Bucks also receive access to CATMA's Guaranteed Ride Home program, which provides them free taxi rides home in cases of emergency-even if the emergency is only a broken-down bicycle. The Bike-Walk program began in 2001 with 17 registered participants. As of March 25, 2005, more than 500 people are registered with a monthly average


of 200 participants being rewarded for their smart commuting. In total, CATMA has given away more than \$70,000 in gift certificates.

In 2003, CATMA signed an agreement with CCTA to provide unlimited access to CATMA's member institutions. Currently, only the University of Vermont is participating in the program. Faculty, staff and students can ride on the transit system completely free of charge. Employees' and students' ID numbers are captured when they get on the bus, enabling CATMA to keep accurate usage records. Different from other unlimited-ride programs which charge a set fee for every employee and/or student regardless of transit usage, CATMA, and in turn, UVM, is charged only for trips actually taken. The rate is discounted from the full fare.

One way CATMA is able to track the success of its TDM programs is through questions asked on their annual web-based transportation surveys. All CATMA institution employees are surveyed each fall and students are surveyed each spring. Last fall's employee survey included this question: "How satisfied are you with your commuting experience?" Only 3.6% said they weren't satisfied-the rest said that they were either "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied." Additionally, the University of Vermont (UVM) saw a 4 percent decrease in the number of cars its students brought to campus between the fall of 2003 and the fall of 2004.

Chris Zeilinger
Community Transportation Association of America

Mr. Tingley also introduced an additional guest on the call - Chris Zeilinger from the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA). CTAA is a non-profit technical assistance organization based in Washington, DC, that participates in a variety of activities to promote better transportation options, especially in rural areas and in areas with special transportation needs. Mr. Zeilinger encouraged everyone to visit CTAA's Web site at www.ctaa.org) for additional information on the organization and to read a recent article about transportation issues in Burlington, Vermont. Mr. Zeilinger also mentioned that CTAA is happy to be involved with Best Workplaces for CommutersSM and hopes that BWC employers will consider them as a technical assistance resource in the future.



every program that they support very personally. There

Open Discussion

Q: Mr. Krejcik, did you perform any surveys regarding your employees' satisfaction with their commutes? Do you know if employees' satisfaction dipped immediately after you relocated your worksite away farther away from public transit? Did your commuting programs help increase their satisfaction?

A: We did, in fact, coordinate a number of surveys; they have all shown that employees are quite happy with the commuting support programs that we have put in place. When Wyeth moved its worksite to Colleagueville, some employees did come to us with their concerns. That was one of the original purposes of my team -- to listen to concerns and develop our commuting programs to address them.

Q: Ms. Schuft, what is your annual budget?

A: Our annual budget is really quite small. We bill our member institutions for almost all of the gift certificates awarded by Bike-Walk Bucks program and the unlimited access bus program. We only pay for a small number of the \$25 gift certificates and we cover the cost of employee's use of the Guaranteed Ride Home program.

Q: Ms. Schuft, are your gift certificates donated by local businesses, or do you need to purchase them?

A: We purchase them.

Q: Does anyone on the call have any experiences to relate regarding telecommuting in rural communities?

A: (Steve Offutt, Best Workplaces for Commuters Representative) I have been in contact with IBM for the last few years. They have over 24,000 employees working out of their homes—a huge percentage of their workforce. Some are urban, some are suburban, and some are rural. They work wherever their homes happen to be. IBM has saved millions of dollars on real estate by avoiding the costs of leasing and maintaining office space for those employees.

Q: Ms. Hollingsworth, how did the excellent management support that you found at Bellingham Cold Storage come to be?

A: I think it goes back to being a family-owned company. Everyone takes each decision that they make and

is a level of responsibility to each other and to the company that might be rare. It's a great place to work, and some people have spent their entire lives here. The average employee at BCS has worked here for more than 17 years, and more than twenty have worked here for 35. We have a very strong sense of community, both within the company and for the town around us.

Conclusion

Mr. Tingley closed by thanking the employers for participating in the forum. He indicated that a summary of this forum will be posted at <www.bwc.gov>. If employers have topic ideas for future phone forums, they are encouraged to submit them to EPA by e-mailing <bwc@epa.gov> or by telling their account manager. If you have questions for any of the speakers, please refer to the information below.

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