



WHITEPAPER

HOW TO DEAL WITH NO SHOWS



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The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) ensures that transit be made available to any who would require public transit but are unable to access it. No shows and late cancellations are unexpected and unfortunate, but are part of the equation when dealing with ADA complementary paratransit operations. The ADA also requires that agencies establish a no show policy in order to set very clear rules and boundaries for the benefit of all riders.

As this [article](#) states, no shows, late cancellations and the destabilizing of a paratransit agency's schedule can "adversely affect the efficiency and effectiveness of service and significantly add to the cost of providing ADA complementary paratransit service." In other words, no shows cause problems for everyone.

There are a number of ways to encourage better practices from riders, including incentives, clearer rules, obvious penalties, and even an incident analysis system to address the key reasons for a no show. The summation of evidence supported in the TRCP document suggests that technology is a primary solution for improving paratransit service. The answer appears to be a combination of better information sharing between rider, driver and dispatch, as well as routing and scheduling software to mitigate the effects of a late cancellation. These are the same issues that agencies face every day.

First, let's examine the effect that no shows have on a demand response transportation operation. Next, we'll examine the root causes of a no show in order to begin the process of eliminating their effect.



The Overall Effect of a No Show

How much does a no show cost your operation? How many of these trips does your operation encounter each month? How many per year? What is your yearly expense for wasted resources? Is this an area you'd like to improve upon?

Have you analyzed your operation to determine the cost of each individual trip? What is the gas expense, the driver's salary, the wear on the vehicle, the vehicle's revenue per mile per day? There are dozens of expenses that are incurred when a legitimate trip is made. To create a general overview, here are the top 5 ways in which a no show can negatively affect your agency.

- **Waste of time.** A driver's time is wasted traveling to a rider's location who is not waiting for service. This lowers a driver's productivity. It also inconveniences the other riders, potentially aboard the vehicle.
- **Waste of money.** According to this [report](#) on the operating expenses of transit agencies operating in the American North-East the average cost of a paratransit trip ranged anywhere between \$24-\$40. A no-show would cost around half these amounts but is still a significant wasted resource.
- **Interferes with your schedule.** Your service offering deteriorates when a vehicle's time is wasted. This time could have been used for valid riders in your vehicles. Perhaps they could have been offered a more convenient boarding time.
- **Encourages "trip hoarding."** If riders begin to get the idea that they can "book" a trip whether they need that trip or not, this can lead to an abuse of your service. You need to have a corrective action system in place to discourage this type of wasteful behavior.

Manual Ways to Prevent No Shows

In this section we look at how an operation can prevent no shows by shifting its policies. As well, we examine how technology, paratransit software for scheduling and improved rider communication can also have a positive effect. Which way works for you will depend upon what you are willing to spend in terms of resources.

Improving the Rider's Relationship with Your Service

In most cases, a no show or late cancellation originates with the rider in terms of their behavior or life circumstance. If they don't take seriously the service you are providing, they are less likely to respect the rules. The best way to improve overall operation is to get your riders on board. They can contribute to their experience by balancing their transportation needs with your service offering. In other words: immediate alerts of cancellations.

Awards and Incentives

If you act in good faith with riders, they will respond in kind. If you are late for a pick-up, have you considered offering a free ride coupon? If it's in your means, perhaps you can institute a rewards program to offer free rides and passes to those riders who show an exceptional example of good trip booking and honoring those trips. Not every agency wants to be bothered with the time and expense required to enact a reward program, but the goal is to connect more deeply with riders so they understand the business model at work.

Policies and Penalties

Do you have a no show policy in place? You need to provide clear guidelines to define the rules of what constitutes a legitimate trip. Therefore, you can demonstrate when a trip falls into a no show category and what is the clear responsibility of the rider. This policy needs to be posted on your website and sent in writing to every rider or rider's representative. This language needs to be clear and concise so as to not produce any ambiguity. There are legitimate reasons why a rider may be forced to cancel a trip late in the schedule:

- Rider is sick
- Family emergency
- Failure of a mobility aid
- Late connection from a transfer trip
- Appointment cancelled/delayed
- Acts of God

Once the rules are clear, you need to enforce them. If a no show percentage reaches around 3%, it's advised that you send both a written and a verbal warning to the rider. This message should be to advise them that they are at risk of losing their door-to-door transportation privileges and of having you refuse to transport them. Transportation for essential medical service appointments cannot be denied, but the rider may be required to use public transportation, instead of your service.

A policy alone can help riders to understand not only their rights to your service, but also their responsibilities when receiving your service. However, a policy alone is not a cure-all for maintaining a perfect schedule.

Digital Ways to Prevent No Shows

Many riders are simply forgetful when it comes to passing on information. They don't intend to abuse or misuse your service. This is why we recommend that you build a rider engagement program to open a line of communication. Beyond that, there is far more that you can do to help your riders to be able save you money by having them get in touch with you. Paratransit software solutions provide various advantages that can help to streamline the trip booking process and provide timely updates to give dispatch the information it needs to make informed decisions quickly. Using technologies that work through the Internet, on cellular and smartphones, in a web-browser window, on tablets and over landline telephones, you can enable riders to have more control over their transportation, while relieving your staff of unnecessary stress and work.

But most importantly, paratransit software can enable notification and communication so you can connect quickly with your riders. This means that you can get notified that a trip has been canceled long before the trip is actually scheduled.

The Paratransit Software Solution

Paratransit software helps by filling the gaps in a schedule and can calculate for an enormous number of variables. In a perfect world, routes are optimized and all the connections are met at precisely the designated moment. Real world conditions would prove to unhinge even the tidiest of schedules. Once one factors in no shows and additional hiccups, it's easy to see how having a digital scheduling system can identify problems faster, create alternative routes faster and deal with a no show faster, so as to prevent the overall effect they can produce to a daily schedule.

Paratransit Software for Scheduling

Your daily schedule may be created the day before. Each rider's pickup and drop off times are locked into the system. Each trip may be for a lifesaving medical appointment and therefore cannot be missed. Every vehicle that is assigned to a rider must match the rider's mobility and medical needs. Errors requiring the correct vehicle type to be sent as replacement are as costly as a no show.

Paratransit Software for Communication

Changes to the schedule can be communicated to drivers through text messages on an in-vehicle tablet application. Data regarding the trip status: arrived, canceled-at-the-door, running late, etc. can all be input using a simple push-button interface. This data is instantly synchronized with back office computers allowing dispatchers make routing and re-routing decisions based upon immediate information, rather than having to ask driver questions via cellphone or radio.

Paratransit Software Calculates the Variables Automatically

The routes and unique schedules of each rider on board the vehicle are calculated and taken into consideration. Through a combination of quick communication between drivers, riders and dispatch, as well as an automatic scheduling algorithm to adjust and heal a schedule automatically, your staff can efficiently handle a no show.

“Acquire technologies that will expedite the collection of accurate information and produce reports that facilitate analysis.”

[Source: p. 33]

In-vehicle Technology

Locating a vehicle is one thing. Being able to send quick updates to drivers is a benefit that is unique to paratransit software with a mobile data computer on board. Speedy updates means that there is a greater chance that “slack time” can be reassigned to a more profitable end. An additional benefit to in-vehicle technology includes being able to time stamp trip events. This is useful data when addressing a discrepancy between a driver’s log and a rider’s dispute over a no show.

Notifications, Trip Portal and IVR

It can be difficult to encourage riders to contact you quickly when they no longer require a previously booked trip. However, you may not have the resources to be able to contact each rider prior to a trip to confirm whether the trip is still needed. This is why having a notifications module as part of your paratransit software suite is one of the great technological advantages that helps to minimize the impact of a late trip cancelation. As well, providing a trip management portal to your riders will allow them to review, edit and cancel trips online so you can get immediate updates to their trip status, which in turn will relieve the call volume for your operators.

Traditional IVR (Interactive Voice Response) systems provide a number of benefits. For riders, IVR reduces lengthy telephone hold times and gives them quick access to the

information they’re seeking. For your operation, an IVR system reduces driver wait times and of course, reduces no shows. Riders have the ability to make reservations as well as cancel or confirm reservations.

When interfaced with an online trip management portal, a notifications service completely frees your operation from dealing with a rider’s trip confirmation and even booking process. At the same time, the rider feels more invested in the reservation process and will have ample opportunity to inform you of changes to their trip requirements as quickly as possible.

TCRP ADVICE

- Acquire computer-assisted or automated scheduling and dispatching.
- Use MDTs, AVLs, and other technologies.
- Incorporate IVR and accessible on-line access to trip reservations, confirmations, and cancelations.

[Source]

Reducing the Impact of No Shows

Know your operation. What do riders expect of you? You need to work towards becoming error-free and in this way, you will be prepared for when unexpected, rider-side issues occur. Yes, you may always find yourself dealing with a canceled-at-the-door event, but it doesn't need to destabilize your day's schedule. Be prepared. Be ready. Be automatic in your response time.

You need to analyze your current operation to learn where it is vulnerable. Has there been a drop in on-time performance due to sudden weather events or unexpected city construction? Automated scheduling may be the tool you need in order to deliver predictability to your riders while offering dependability to your schedulers and dispatchers. Having an integrated rider database that accurately contains the precise information reservationists require to make a fast trip booking will also help to prevent errors on your end.

The TCRP document provides irrefutable evidence to suggest that automated scheduling, digital data collection and AVL (Automatic Vehicle Location) capabilities through in-vehicle MDT (Mobile Data Terminal) devices are all essential components to fixing the no show problem.

Conclusion

Before you implement a no show program, it's vital that you examine and analyze current conditions. Assemble the metrics for determining:

- The actual cost of a no show, trip refusal at the door and late cancelations
- Other events that cost as much as a no show
- The cost of managing a policy
- Current customer satisfaction (who would benefit from such a program?)

Determine whether establishing a program is cost-effective and is designed to provide returns on this initial investment.

Purchasing paratransit software with an additional web trip booking and a notifications module may incur a higher initial investment but also produce higher returns for the life of the system. It's important to talk to your prospective software vendor to ensure that you are getting the full functionality that you require so you don't find yourself getting roped into a long-term purchase as you add on components over time.

When it comes to paratransit software itself, there are a great many variables and conditions that are unique to each and every agency. No shows will not reduce themselves and are likely to become a worse problem if left

unaddressed. In fact, the problem can get worse if riders start to believe that your service is "free" and therefore expendable. They need to be made aware that the service isn't free and that it provides value to those that use it.

The solution is clear: it takes a combination of sound business practices and technology in order to remove the conditions that lead to a no show.

TripSpark Technologies provides software solutions to automate outbound and inbound notifications, as well as a trip management portal for your riders. We offer a cloud-based interactive voice system that is far more affordable and quick to implement than traditional IVR.

