

Marketing and Communications Report

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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to assess the current marketing and communications of the Greater Mankato Transit System (GMTS) and to provide recommendations that can help the system better connect with riders and the Greater Mankato area community.

The marketing and branding of the GMTS has been studied previously, but recent significant system growth makes this an appropriate time to reevaluate the marketing and communication elements of the transit system. In order to implement the recommendations outlined in this report, the development of a Marketing and Communications Plan for GMTS is recommended in the next two years.

System Branding

Current System Branding

The Greater Mankato Transit System is commonly referred to by the acronym GMTS, and the logo is a simple “MTS” mark that is easy to associate with the city. The “M” letterform is pulled directly from the official logo for the city of Mankato and the “S” mimics the logo by being set in a similar vertically-stretched serif font. The “T” in the logo references the iconic “T” symbol used by other major cities in Minnesota, most notably Metro Transit in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and Metro Bus in St. Cloud. By using the recognizable “T” symbol, GMTS creates a connection to other transit systems in the state. The full name, “Greater Mankato Transit System,” is always included beneath the logo and occasionally “CALL 625-RIDE” is added in vertical text next to the GMTS mark.



GMTS currently relies on a few standard graphic and visual elements. Red and blue are used throughout the map and marketing materials and purple and yellow are used to represent transit offerings specifically related to the Minnesota State University, Mankato (MSU-Mankato). A teal color is used frequently on system route and schedule documents and again mimics the official city logo and branding. GMTS uses the typeface Futura consistently across all route and schedule materials. This is a strong choice that ensures visual consistency, because it connects to the prominent red “T” and helps to ensure that all information is displayed similarly.

COLLECTED LOGOS IN USE:



ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES OF GMTS LOGO USAGE:



Recommendations for System Branding

Effective branding goes beyond the name and logo, creating a visual and thematic system that can be applied to all parts of the brand. While there are many positive aspects of the current GMTS branding, there are ways to improve the branding to better connect with riders and the community. Pairing the name (Greater Mankato Transit System) with an acronym (GMTS) that doesn't match exactly creates an immediate disconnect between the two. Therefore, it would be beneficial to start using the acronym GMTS to improve system clarity and recognition.

By using symbols like those used by Metro Transit and Metro Bus, GMTS is missing an opportunity to create a stronger, more localized presence for Mankato's transit system. It would be beneficial for GMTS to use local images, ideas, or icons that could create a stronger sense of place.

Currently, the student population and general population are presented with different information about GMTS services. The connection between GMTS, the City of Mankato, and MSU-Mankato could be strengthened by focused marketing campaigns tying the three together and encouraging people to view GMTS as a resource for all of Mankato.

GMTS could benefit from new visual branding, including the development of a distinct logo, brand guidelines, and supporting graphics. The new logo and supporting graphics could refresh the brand by bringing in more transit-oriented imagery, referencing local geography/landmarks, and incorporating phone or web resources. The use of illustrations or iconography could help communicate ideas more effectively—especially for non-English speakers—and more immediately convey the GMTS purpose and services it provides. Additionally, routes such as the Stomper Express, Late Night Express, and the U-Zone routes, feature custom branding, characters, and information. While there is merit to customized maps and schedules, branding should be consistent across sub-groupings.

EXAMPLE TRANSIT ICONOGRAPHY:



EXAMPLE TRANSIT ILLUSTRATIONS:



Source: Adobe Fotolia

If a new logo or imagery is created for the transit system, a brand style guide should be produced to establish the colors, fonts, logo use rules, and writing guidelines for all print and electronic communications. This will reinforce a more modern and purposeful visual language for communication going forward. Once a brand style guide is established, it should be shared with all transit system staff and followed closely to ensure that all communication is consistent.

New imagery and graphics could also lead to new opportunities for GMTS to invest in public art around the Greater Mankato area. Like Metro Transit's use of public art installations to show their commitment to high quality service, GMTS could demonstrate a more creative and forward-thinking view of public transportation as an essential element in the community.

Maps and Schedule Materials

Current Maps and Schedule Materials

Route, schedule, and fare information is essential for current and potential transit riders. This information is currently provided through brochures, maps, posters, and on the MSU-Mankato and Mankato websites as well as through Google Transit. For a modern transit user, system information should not be thought of as online vs. offline, but as information that is readily available for users in whichever form they would prefer to access it.

A standard look and feel has been established for route information brochures. These rely on strong graphic hierarchy to convey route numbers, and the schedule is displayed in a clean and concise table. The maps included in the brochures are clean, well-designed, free of distracting information, and include landmarks for reference. The routes are presented with contrasting colors, weights, and patterns, ensuring that users who are colorblind or visually impaired are more likely to get the necessary information.

Recommendations for Maps and Schedule Materials

While there are strengths to the existing map and schedule materials, those engaged in this project have expressed that route maps, schedules, and fare information are sometimes confusing or challenging to access. The experience of accessing route and fare information could be improved in several ways.

Currently, there is not a system map for the GMTS. A system map would provide a better sense of the overall system and how GMTS services could be incorporated into trips and commutes. In addition to a static system map, an interactive web-based map would allow people to see exactly how the system works in and around their origin and destination points in a way that is familiar and intuitive.

While using different colored lines for each bus route is an effective way to display where routes operate, these colors should be used more consistently (e.g., Route 6 is shown in solid brown on general GMTS materials and shown as dashed red on MSU-Mankato materials) and carried through to varied materials to display the information more clearly. By committing to color representation for each route, GMTS could elevate and simplify all map, route, and schedule information presented to the public.

Another opportunity for improvement to route maps and schedules is to more closely align information on route materials with the landmarks and geographic areas they serve. This could be accomplished by emphasizing landmarks on route maps or as timepoints on the schedule. Providing more variety in the available brochures could allow GMTS to offer route information more tailored to users' needs.

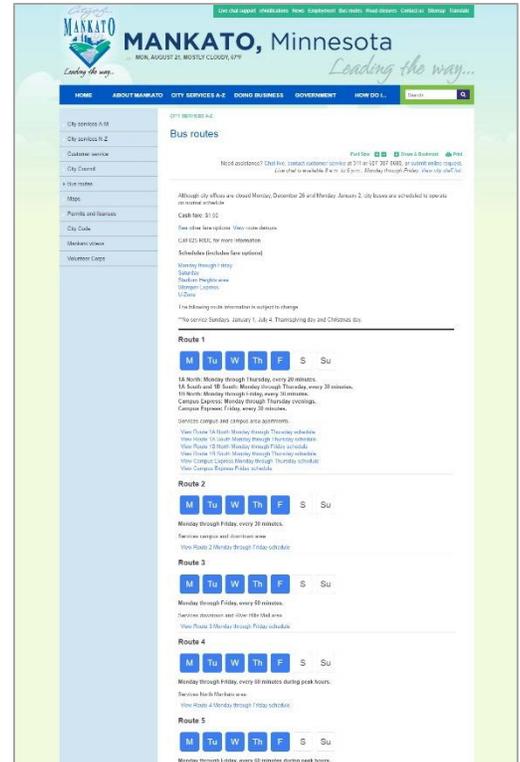
Additionally, some riders and potential riders would benefit from readily available materials that have been translated to languages other than English. Several languages, including Spanish, various African languages, and Korean, are spoken in the Mankato area. By further simplifying the schedule,

communicating more information visually, and translating materials, GMTS could provide a more welcoming environment for non-English speaker riders.

Online Materials

Current Online Materials

GMTS information is available on dedicated pages within both the City of Mankato and MSU-Mankato websites. On the city website, GMTS branding has not been applied nor is the full name or GMTS acronym used anywhere on the page. The information is well-organized and presented clearly, with no need to click or rely on PDF viewing capabilities to see it. However, trying to print that information poses



a challenge because it does not fit well on standard paper sizes. The page does serve as a sole source for GMTS information and features logical navigation and content hierarchy. The simple colored boxes below the route numbers are especially successful in quickly conveying daily service availability. Links are available with information about detours, non-standard fares, and arrival/departure times. At times, however, that information is not immediately linked and available.

PRIMARY WEB RESOURCES:

On the MSU-Mankato website, the GMTS name and logo are displayed more prominently, strengthening the connection between the campus and transit services. Bus and shuttle information are in multiple locations, and information about how to ride is available by clicking a link to view individual PDF documents. The MSU-Mankato webpages promote the Stomper Express and MavCard program prominently, but there is not a strong connection to rest of the transit system. The university transit webpages feature special advertising campaigns in which Stomper the Maverick (the official MSU-Mankato mascot) demonstrates how to access and ride various transit services and routes.



One unique and valuable feature of the MSU-Mankato website is the ability to see photos and detailed information about individual bus stops around campus. The general location maps and specific photos of each shelter let riders see exactly where they should wait for the bus. This information is not standard and shows that special attention is being made to accommodate student riders.

Recommendations for Online Materials

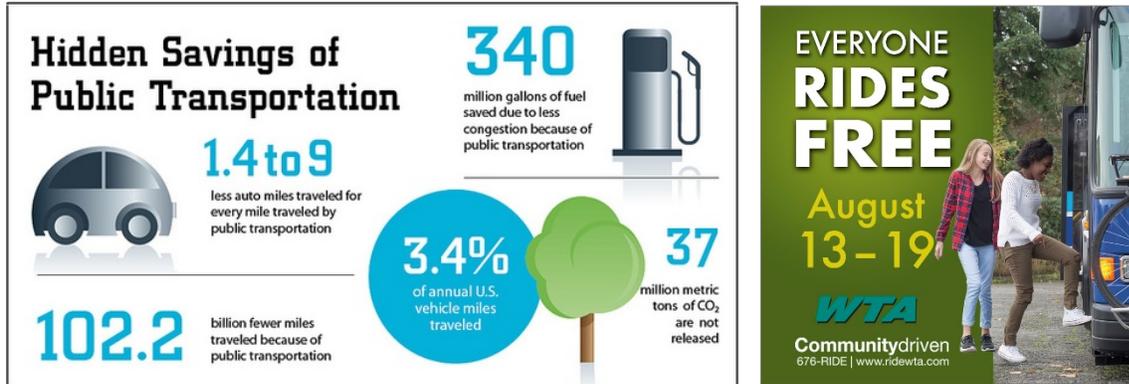
The online resources are beneficial in their current state but could be improved by streamlining and improving the content presentation and more proactively answering questions.

One recommendation is to remedy any inconsistencies between print and online resources, ensuring that both content and format are consistent across mediums. Ideally, all route and schedule information included in the printed brochures should be available online without needing to view the PDF version. A PDF link should certainly be included for ease of printing, but maps, tables, and information should be presented as text and graphics that do not require a PDF viewer so that they are accessible for all users, including the visually impaired. This will also allow content to be appropriately prepared for ideal viewing on different devices such as a phone, tablet, or desktop computer, or to be used by different data sources such as Google Transit or other web-based data-driven applications. PDFs should be prepared so that they display and print correctly on standard sizes of paper. For ease of use by screen-reading software, PDFs should also meet basic accessibility standards including alternate text for images, defined content headings and page structure/navigation, and the necessary document metadata (title, author, etc.).

Beyond actual route and schedule information, GMTS should consider creating additional content that explains GMTS services and goals in a more general, narrative-based way. A frequently asked questions (FAQ) section could help answer frequent questions that users may not know how to articulate and remove barriers shared by potential riders. Content about the history of GMTS could provide perspective about how transit service has grown and how GMTS plans to keep evolving to meet riders' needs. A testimonials section could help show more people in Mankato how realistic and easy it is to ride the bus to work or school. If it is determined that the content should remain different on the City of Mankato's website compared to the MSU-Mankato website, GMTS should consider creating an umbrella site that contains all the information for both sources. For accountability and consistency of the data shared in various places online, a "master site" that is edited and managed by GMTS could be especially beneficial. As additional communities are served—such as expansion to Eagle Lake—a standalone GMTS website could more easily adapt and be updated to share latest information with new riders and potential riders.

Whether a new GMTS-specific website is developed or the existing web pages are maintained, a refresh of the content to be more visually appealing could help engage current and potential riders. Imagery and graphics could be used to tell a transit story and help connect with both existing and potential riders. Imagery could include photos illustrating the diversity of users riding GMTS services, local landmarks with buses in the foreground, infographics displaying some of the more impressive ridership data, transit iconography for simplified communication and a more modern aesthetic, and general graphics that feature the GMTS name, logo, and relevant phone numbers to advertise and promote GMTS.

EXAMPLE TRANSIT INFOGRAPHIC/ADVERTISEMENT:



Source: CityLab

GMTS would also benefit from the creation of online content that is informational, relevant, entertaining, and easily shareable. This could take the form of new or updated 'How to ride' videos that could be embedded on the various GMTS webpages and social media accounts, and that shared as needed elsewhere online.

Another way to advertise and increase GMTS visibility in Mankato would be to partner with local businesses or pay for promotion at local events. Serving as an "official transportation partner" or promoting special services to and from festivals or fairs would be an effective way to advertise the transit system around campus and the Greater Mankato area.

Moving forward, GMTS should focus on creating more compelling content everywhere GMTS interacts with the public, including in printed brochures, on relevant webpages, and in advertisements both on the inside and outside of the buses and in shelters.

Communication and Feedback Channels

Current Communication and Feedback Channels

Several methods are in place to communicate with GMTS staff. On MSU-Mankato transit materials, riders are invited to email questions or comments directly to towens@mankatomn.gov or to call 311 or 507-625-RIDE. No similar information is currently provided on the MSU-Mankato transit webpages. On the brochures provided to riders off-campus, only 311 and 507-625-RIDE phone numbers are listed as contact methods, with the added option to call to make mobility bus reservations. The City of Mankato website clearly presents links allowing visitors to chat live with city staff, call 507-387-8600, or submit a general customer service comment or request.

The City of Mankato website has a link to a Facebook page called page called Mankato Bus Information; it is connected with fewer than 100 people and appears to be inactive. Elsewhere online, there is a Mankato City Bus Twitter account (@MktoCityBus), but it is also inactive. The social media pages do not present any information about GMTS nor does the link to additional route and fare information work correctly (at the time of this writing). The City of Mankato's YouTube account includes a couple of simple instructional videos about GMTS services. This account seems to be the most active social media outlet and a new video is released approximately once a month.

As part of the Transit Development Plan (TDP), GMTS has created a project-specific website for people to submit general comments or take online surveys tailored to rider or non-rider needs. This website is being used in conjunction with the existing 507-625-RIDE (7433) hotline. The hotline phone number works well and is an effective way to invite riders to get information.

Recommendations for Communication and Feedback Channels

Simple changes could also be made to the existing GMTS communication channels. A generalized email address (e.g. comments@mankatomn.gov or RIDE@mankatomn.gov) could replace towens@mankatomn.gov. This would be less confusing for riders and easier to widely share and promote. Additionally, an online comment form should be available on every GMTS webpage to provide feedback about the system, ask questions, or provide operator commendations.

Any social media accounts that cannot remain active and monitored should be deleted, since an inactive account detracts from a brand and can frustrate users looking for current information from those sources. If any existing social media accounts use the GMTS name or logos but are not managed or maintained by GMTS, the owners should be contacted or they should be reported for deletion. YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook are three social media tools in which GMTS should consider reinvesting. Instructional videos that focus on student groups, older adults, new Americans, those attending events, those new to the Greater Mankato area, or Mobility Bus riders could be posted on YouTube. Videos could also focus on riding the bus during various times of year or share stories from riders who rely on GMTS. With an active Twitter account, GMTS could receive comments directly from riders and more quickly provide answers and online resources. Twitter can also be used to share detours or rider alert information. On Facebook, an active and current page would allow GMTS to better connect with the Greater Mankato community. The GMTS Facebook page could promote transit-supported events or meetings, share photos of the system, promote news about the system, share operator commendations, and provide system updates.

Direct communication with the public could also take place through continued public events. Hosting 'How to Ride' informational sessions at local high schools, non-profit groups, and mobile home parks would allow GMTS to promote the benefits of riding the bus to a wider audience.

New Media and Technologies

Recommendations for New Media and Technologies

A myriad of digital tools are available that can provide a better rider experience. Dynamic content can engage people in a way that benefits both the rider and GMTS. Webpages showing GMTS transit information and resources could provide more information than a table of arrival and departure times by incorporating real-time data feeds to show true traffic information.

An interactive map of route information can provide context and detailed information to a rider in a format that is as familiar to them, such as Google Maps. Using an interactive map powered by GMTS-supplied data could allow for the creation of tools like a system status indicator and live detour map. Installing or collecting GPS data would allow GMTS to have a better sense of how the system is functioning and would allow for trip travel length or arrival times to be recorded and presented to riders online or at equipped bus stops or transit hubs. Recently, transit systems across the country have incorporated an SMS text-messaging system to alert people to detours or pertinent route information.

Another popular transit technology that has been implemented by agencies across the country is a trip planning tool. On the Metro Transit website, users can select starting and ending points (by searching for an address, intersection, or landmark) and the time they would like to depart or arrive. Additional settings that can be changed include the maximum walking distance allowed, the preferred service type, the user's travel priorities (faster trips, fewer transfers, or less walking) or if wheelchair accessibility is needed. By allowing users to input their own information and preferences, they can find trips that are more convenient and customized to their needs. This would be an excellent way to elevate GMTS services. The trip planning tool works on desktop computer and mobile devices and allows users to more successfully use transit in their daily lives.

As GMTS uses real-time data feeds to improve services and provide tools, the development of a mobile-friendly data-driven GMTS web application should be considered. Around 77 percent of Americans own a smartphone and users appreciate travel information that is easily available. Combining a GMTS interactive map, real-time data feeds, and trip planning capabilities into one app would be an excellent way to serve the modern transit rider. Before beginning the development of an app, GMTS should perform additional research to see what technologies are currently in place and which would most benefit riders locally. A first step could be to using local resources to assess the GMTS app needs and capabilities would be to work with students from the MSU-Mankato Computer Information Technology and Computer Engineering Technology programs. After gathering initial ideas, off-the-shelf applications that provide 'turn-key' solutions could easily be used to get something launched. There are web developers around the country who can customize these tools to meet GMTS needs. Creating and maintaining a robust set of interactive online tools would position GMTS to serve Greater Mankato well into the future.