

CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

The public transit industry faces substantial workforce shortages, particularly among bus operators. With an aging operator workforce — nearly half of drivers nationally are over age 55 — and increasing waves of retirement, it is estimated that the industry will need to fill 20,000 operator jobs annually through 2032.¹ Established in 2021 as the Federal Transit Administration’s technical assistance center for workforce development, the Transit Workforce Center (TWC) is operated by the International Transportation Learning Center (ITLC). Since its launch, TWC has developed resources to support transit locations across the country in exploring strategies and approaches to effectively reach and recruit a strong frontline transit workforce, helping ensure transit can deliver efficient, safe services to families and communities.

To further strengthen these resources and the research base for providing guidance on effective actions to address transit’s recruitment challenges, TWC partnered with a strategic communications agency, Reingold, Inc., to design and implement a strategic marketing and outreach research program. A pilot digital advertising campaign followed, aimed at identifying optimal strategies to reach and engage high-value industry prospects.

Through this effort, TWC conducted iterative, mixed-mode marketing research, beginning with a literature review, a landscape assessment, and stakeholder interviews. After a national survey of targeted audiences, as well as a control group of the general public (individuals with driver’s licenses and above the age of 18), more likely receptive audiences were identified. Focus groups were then conducted to better understand those audiences, culminating in a two-month test of sample digital messaging.

Overall, this research was designed to answer the following questions:

- What perceptions do target groups currently have about transit careers?
- Which target groups are most favorably inclined toward pursuing a career in public transit?
- What values, messages, and creative elements would most motivate different target groups to consider a career in public transit?

While transit technician careers were explored, the primary focus of this research targeted groups interested in pursuing bus operator careers. The audience research generated insights into the values and messages that are most compelling to potential candidates for these careers, while the creative testing provided guidance on the most appropriate and appealing messages and images to put forward.

¹ TWC analysis of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024, February). Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey.

HIGHLIGHTED FINDINGS

TARGET GROUPS

Entering this effort, TWC determined that project resources would be best spent on workers in adjacent transit industries, theorizing that those audiences would be more receptive to career awareness outreach than the general population. The overall level of responsiveness among the targeted groups validated the selection strategy and yielded useful data on how to best connect with the chosen targets.

The workforce segments selected for exploration were: commercially licensed truck drivers; rideshare or delivery “gig” drivers; military veterans, who are already well-represented in industries like trucking; and current job seekers with an existing interest in automotive or transportation topics. In addition, TWC added youth ages 18-24 to the project scope to explore this cohort’s comparative responsiveness. The major findings for each selected group are noted below, followed by key takeaways from the campaign, including messaging and visual design.

- **Gig drivers**, who are characterized by high degrees of career mobility, lower incomes, and low rates of receiving job benefits, were the most receptive among audiences tested.
- **Working professionals**, particularly those ages 24–49 and with 1–10 years of experience, were more receptive than younger and less experienced audiences, including vocational students.
- **Veterans**, particularly those recently discharged from the military and those whose service involved driving or vehicle maintenance, were also receptive.
- **Job seekers with an interest in automotive or transportation topics** are a particularly cost-effective audience for digital targeting.



MESSAGING

Message testing identified the following as the strongest motivating values and the strongest negative perceptions to overcome.

- **Aspirational messages** related to personal advancement and rewarding human interactions — reflected in the campaign tagline “Be a driving force in your community” — are best suited to encouraging positive perceptions of the transit industry. While more than 80% of respondents agreed operators were important to the community, significantly fewer felt they were respected.
- **Compensation and job stability** are the strongest motivators for taking transit jobs, though these more “transactional” values are likely less suited to an aspirational campaign. Among mechanics, a steady job and job security were slightly stronger motivators than a competitive salary and benefits.
- **Perceptions of low wages** and having to deal with rude or unruly passengers are the strongest deterrents for considering transit careers.
- **News and social media** significantly influence public perceptions of the transit industry. Media coverage of public transit often highlights incidents of violence, which tend to receive the highest degree of attention, as well as service disruptions. Online sentiment analysis suggests that nearly half of social media mentions about bus drivers are negative. Increasing the prevalence and prominence of human-interest stories, such as those highlighting operators’ meaningful contributions to their communities, can help counter negative media coverage by strengthening positive perceptions of the industry and the frontline workforce’s role in the community.

VISUAL APPEAL

Creative testing of visuals featuring different demographic groups and graphic treatments revealed the following insights:

- **In-context depictions** of transit professionals actively doing their jobs — including drivers sitting at the wheel and interacting with passengers and mechanics working hands-on with engine components — were more effective than more abstract career depictions.
- **Aspirational depictions** of individuals taking pride and enjoyment in their work are important to creating positive associations with the work and industry.
- **Varied images** with demographic range are important to illustrate that transit careers are open to all.
- **Bold colors** capture attention and evoke positive associations with the transportation field.

DIGITAL ADVERTISING TACTICS

While TWC's pilot advertising campaign was limited in time and scope, it offers valuable lessons in ad targeting and tactics that can be applied to larger-scale advertising efforts.

- **Industry-adjacent audiences**, including truck drivers and auto mechanics, saw the highest rates of ad engagement. However, reaching them required a higher cost per click due to the niche nature of these segments. If campaign goals involve strengthening recruitment, these segments will be an important component of the audience mix.
- **Job seekers** with an interest in automotive or transportation topics were the most cost-effective to reach and motivate with digital ads. Overlaying these interest-based targeting criteria will be particularly important for attracting younger audiences who might otherwise be less disposed toward the industry.
- **Social media ad platforms** (Instagram and Facebook) significantly outperformed programmatic display advertising (banners appearing on websites and apps), though the latter tactic is still likely effective for promoting broad awareness at low cost.



TAKING ADVANTAGE OF LESSONS LEARNED

Over the course of the two-month digital outreach and career awareness campaign, 17,000 individuals clicked into TWC's [Transit Career Explorer](#), the landing page created to provide information about frontline careers and how to locate those careers in their communities. Although that number likely included webpage viewers who had not seen the ads, the timing makes it clear that the vast majority of those who viewed the page did come through this project's outreach. That volume of traffic indicates that transit agencies using similar approaches could see a significant increase in the number of individuals exploring the careers section of their websites.

TWC's Career Explorer landing page is part of a larger [National Frontline Transit Worker Recruitment Campaign](#), which also includes a [Recruitment Toolkit](#) with sample ads, videos, themes, case studies, and strategies gathered from agencies across the country. The other section of the Campaign website features [Transit Career Stories](#), where frontline workers share their career journeys, increasing understanding of and highlighting the vital role they play in their communities.

For any campaign to be successful, it is critical that the messaging continues when interested individuals visit an agency's website. A prominent and visually engaging Careers section of the agency website should reflect both the aspirational (community, service) and transactional (wages, benefits, stability) aspects of frontline careers, featuring frontline worker visuals and voices, either through photos and quotations or, where possible, videos of people doing their work and talking about it to the now-engaged potential applicant. In addition, while this project focused on testing digital outreach strategies, TWC's case studies and suggested strategies, based on agencies' experiences, underscore the importance of in-person outreach for recruitment, leveraging the most powerful and effective ambassadors: the workers themselves.



THE UNDERLYING RESEARCH – DETAILED FINDINGS

QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

To gain comprehensive insights into perceptions and experiences of public transit, we conducted a two-wave quantitative survey with 1,802 respondents. A control group of unspecialized members of the general public provided a baseline for comparison with populations of interest. Bus mechanics and transit administrators received separate survey questionnaires tailored to their specific roles within the industry.

Chart 1: Survey Sample Composition

| Audience | Sample Size (n) |
|--|-----------------|
| Truck drivers | 207 |
| Gig drivers | 283 |
| As primary occupation | 222 |
| As secondary occupation | 61 |
| Vocational students | 181 |
| Transportation, automotive, mechanical, engineering, building trades | 42 |
| Veterans | 216 |
| In target occupations | 170 |
| Transit administrators | 140 |
| Auto Mechanics | 190 |
| General public (control group) | 585 |

Key insights include the following:

Audience characteristics. Demographic and behavioral characteristics of key target audience groups were correlated with favorability towards careers in the transit industry.

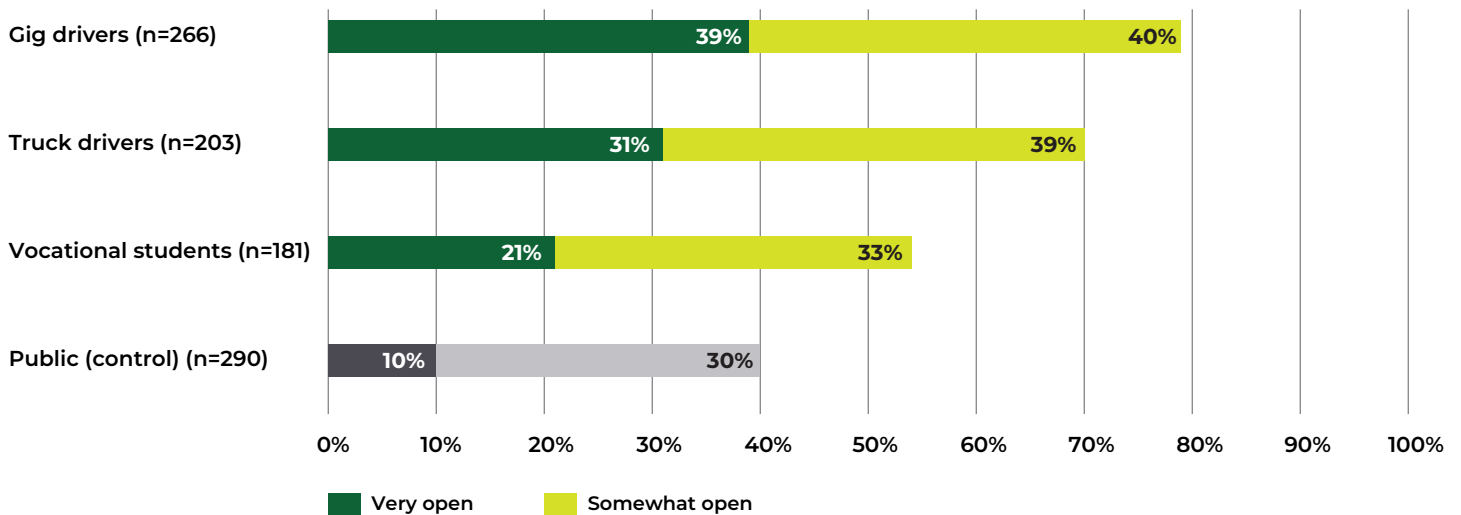
- **Time in occupation.** Among truck drivers surveyed, 37% have been in their jobs for more than 10 years. Since they tend to spend longer periods in their occupation, they tend to be relatively well established in their careers and are less likely to change jobs. By comparison, 17% of gig drivers have been in their occupation for less than one year, and 62% less than five years.

- **Job satisfaction.** Gig drivers have lower job satisfaction than other audiences surveyed. Only 36% of gig drivers surveyed are “very satisfied” with their job, compared with 57% of truck drivers and 43% of auto mechanics.
- **Likelihood to change jobs.** Gig drivers have high rates of career mobility. 34% of gig drivers surveyed are “very likely” to change jobs within the next year, compared with 12% of truck drivers and 17% of mechanics.
- **Job benefits.** Job benefits are an attractive aspect of a career in public transit. Fewer than half (47%) of gig drivers surveyed receive benefits as part of their job, compared with 71% of mechanics and 80% of truck drivers.
- **Income.** Nearly half of gig drivers surveyed have a household income of less than \$50,000 a year.

Openness to transit careers. Openness to a career in public transit varied across target-audience characteristics.

Chart 2: Transit Career Favorability by Select Occupations

If you were looking for a new work opportunity, how open would you be to a [job/career] as a bus operator with your local public transit agency?



- **By occupation.** Gig drivers were significantly more open (39% “very open”) to a career as a bus operator than vocational students (21%) and the general public (10%). Among auto mechanics assessed, 36% were “very open” to a career as a bus mechanic.

- **By age.** Individuals ages 25-34 were most open (45% “very open”) to operator careers compared to those ages 18–24 (17%) and 50–64 (26%).
- **By likelihood to change jobs.** Individuals “very likely” to change jobs in the next year were most open to operator careers (51% “very open”) compared to those “not very” (19%) or “not at all” (23%) likely to change jobs.
- **By veteran status.** Military veterans were significantly more open to transit careers than non-veterans among the general public, particularly veterans discharged fewer than five years ago (45% “very open”) and those whose service involved driving or vehicle maintenance (43% “very open”).
- **“Career” vs. “job”:** TWC split-tested whether using alternatively the term “career” or “job” in describing transit occupations had an effect on audiences’ favorability. While “career” saw marginally better favorability, this was not a significant result.

Perceptions of transit careers. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statements: “Public bus operators are important to their communities,” “Driving a public bus would be a rewarding career,” “I would encourage a friend or relative to pursue a job as a public bus operator,” and “Public bus operators are respected.”

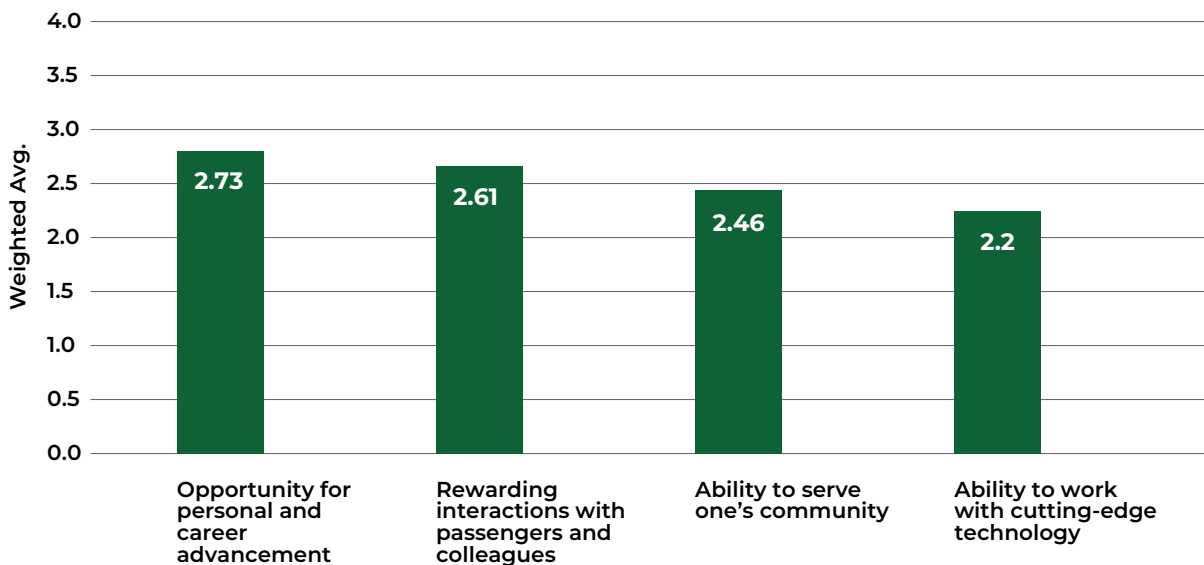
- **Importance and respect.** More than 80% of respondents agree that bus operators are important to their communities, but significantly fewer agree that they are respected.
- **By age.** Across dimensions, respondents ages 18-24 had the lowest opinion of operator careers. Older respondents, particularly those ages 35–49, had higher favorability (over 70% agreement across dimensions).
- **By occupation.** Among target occupations, vocational students had the lowest opinion of transit careers across all dimensions.

Motivators and barriers. Respondents were asked how important a variety of factors would be to considering transit jobs.

- **Pay and benefits,** followed closely by job security and having a “steady” job, were top motivators for considering a job as a bus operator. Among mechanics, a steady job and job security were slightly stronger motivators than a competitive salary and benefits.

Chart 3: Weighted Average Ranking of Motivating Values

Please rank the following value propositions by how strongly they would factor in choosing whether to be public operator



- **Working with technology** and a hands-on work environment scored lowest among the factors tested.
- **Rude passengers and low wages** were cited as top barriers to considering transit careers. Truck drivers (56%) were particularly concerned about having to deal with rude or unruly riders. Vocational students (57%) were particularly concerned about low wages.

Message testing. TWC tested a variety of messages as potential campaign taglines across various thematic categories: community and belonging, personal advancement, and technology and innovation. The top-performing messages convey the appeal not just of having a job that pays the bills, but also of one that provides a sense of purpose by fostering a connection to your community. It appeals to the idea of being an active player in the community, helping others, and creating a positive impact. This sense of pride in the job offers a dual incentive: personal fulfillment and contributing to the well-being of others.

The top three options across a variety of audience segments were as follows. These were also adapted and tested among auto mechanics, where they were also the top performers. TWC ultimately adopted “Be a driving force in your community” for its campaign.

- **Be a driving force in your community.**
Bus operators keep communities running. Play a pivotal role in your neighborhood: Take the wheel as a public bus operator.
- **Move everyone you meet.**
Help him reach his first day of work. Help them get home safely. Become a bus operator and connect your community to the destinations that matter.
- **Good people. Great work.**
Driving a bus is all about making connections. And it’s the people who make the ride worthwhile.



FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

To complement survey data with qualitative insights, TWC conducted three small focus group discussions with a small number of participants who were either gig drivers or long-haul truck drivers. Discussions centered on participants' satisfaction with their current jobs, openness to considering the role of a bus operator, and reactions to alternative campaign concepts. Key takeaways include the following.

- **Tradeoffs:** Professional drivers navigate a trade-off between the flexibility and autonomy of gig work versus the stability and benefits offered by bus driving. Individual personality and past job experience often dictate where their preferences lie on that spectrum.
- **Motivators for switching:** Many in this industry are motivated by a love of driving, which is also an appealing aspect of public transit. Stable pay, job benefits, and guaranteed hours were seen as major advantages of bus driving. Some participants found public service and the social aspect of bus driving appealing; an outgoing personality and enjoyment working with people may be strong predictors of suitability for bus driving.
- **Concerns about public transit:** Some participants were hesitant to consider bus driving due to worries about managing and liability for passengers, schedule unpredictability, and getting “stuck” in a rigid structure.

TWC also gathered qualitative feedback on participants' reactions to proposed campaign messaging and creative, consistent with the findings described in the following section.



CREATIVE TESTING

Building on research insights about the messaging themes and potential taglines that most resonated with target audiences, TWC developed and tested a series of creative executions to represent the look and feel of a potential advertising campaign. Concepts were tested through focus group discussions (n=9) and a second wave of online testing (n=650) among target audiences.

Concept options reflected different visual styles, color palettes, and type treatments. Research participants were exposed to multiple versions of each concept, depicting variety across the study participants. Mechanics received separate designs relevant to their occupation.

Results of this testing favored naturalistic depictions of transit professionals actively engaged in their jobs. Participants appreciated the straightforward approach of the top-performing concept, featuring a driver behind the wheel with a positive attitude. They also liked its bright design and legibility of text. This creative option also performed best among mechanics.

TWC ultimately adapted the top-performing creative concept to align with existing TWC brand colors, increase the technical accuracy of staff depictions, and further iterate across ethnic and gender combinations.

Sample Images



PILOT DIGITAL ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

As a culmination of the research effort, TWC launched an evidence-based, multichannel digital advertising campaign to reach and engage identified audience groups. Ads ran for eight weeks across a selection of digital platforms, including social media (Facebook and Instagram) and programmatic banner displays, leveraging digital targeting technologies to reach defined audiences across their devices.

PAID MEDIA STRATEGY

The campaign strategy emphasized maximizing cross-platform ad exposure and real-time performance monitoring to optimize budget allocation, with resources prioritized towards high-performing platforms and audience segments.

Intended as a pilot campaign to lay the groundwork for eventual larger-scale awareness or recruitment efforts, TWC sought to establish cost benchmarks for delivering ads to target audiences at the ideal frequency recommended by the advertising platforms for creating awareness and message retention (for example, 10 ad exposures per platform over the course of the campaign). This will enable TWC to model expected costs for expanding reach and impressions at this ideal ad frequency level with the availability of additional budget.

As a secondary metric, TWC monitored ad engagement (i.e., clicks) as a proxy measure for how effective ads may be in motivating audiences to learn more about transit careers or take actions like applying for a job.

Digital Campaign KPIs

| Objective | Description | Metrics |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Awareness | Optimize delivery of ad impressions at the ideal frequency. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Impressions: Number of times ads are delivered• CPM: Cost per thousand impressions |
| Engagement | Drive ad clicks and website visits to the designated landing page. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• CTR: Click-through rate• CPC: Cost per click |

TWC ran parallel digital campaigns addressed to 1) prospective bus operators, and 2) prospective bus mechanics, each with separate budget allocations and using distinctive

creative executions. Ads targeted online populations believed to be most receptive to these careers based on our research, including CDL-holding truck drivers, gig drivers, and veterans. For the bus mechanic campaign, we targeted auto mechanics and veterans. To reach an audience of young people who are a high priority for the future of the industry, we overlaid targeting parameters related to job-seeking behaviors and interest in automotive topics on the 18–24 age group.

The campaign's primary KPI was the optimized delivery of ad impressions at an ideal frequency to build awareness among the target audience, while secondary KPIs included driving ad engagement and increasing website traffic to the designated landing page.

TWC independently developed a campaign landing page that enabled users to learn more about transit career options. At this time, the page did not permit functionality to locate or apply for open jobs at a local agency.



CAMPAIGN PERFORMANCE

By platform. Combined, the Bus Mechanics and Bus Operators digital campaigns delivered strong results, reaching a wide audience with over 15.3 million impressions and generating 20,801 clicks to the campaign website. Across both campaigns, Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram) consistently drove higher traffic and engagement compared to programmatic channels.

- For Bus Operators, Meta achieved a 43% higher CTR and a 53% lower CPC.
- For Bus Mechanics, Meta achieved an 80% higher CTR and an 83% lower CPC.

By audience: operators

- **Gig Drivers** had the highest rate of engagement with ads (.18% CTR), consistent with our research showing they are most receptive to campaign messaging. Despite a cost premium to reach them (\$5.60 CPM), gig drivers remain a valuable target if the overriding objective is to fill jobs.
- **Age 18–24 job seekers with a transportation interest** were the most cost-effective audience to motivate (\$2.30 CPC). Layering relevant interests over the job seeker category resulted in a 36% increase in CTR and a 22% decrease in CPC over the campaign duration. This strong result suggests that digital advertising reached more relevant young audiences than we could sample in our surveys.
- **Veterans** were the least expensive to reach (\$3.35 CPM) but had the lowest level of engagement (.12% CTR). Future campaigns should consider overlaying interest categories on the broad veteran audience to increase engagement.

Chart 5: Operator Campaign Performance Metrics

| Campaign | Target Audience | Spend | Impressions | CPM | Clicks | CTR | CPC |
|--------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| Operators | Gig Drivers | \$13,099.73 | 2,339,279 | \$5.60 | 4,112 | 0.18% | \$3.19 |
| | CDL Holders | \$12,099.93 | 2,238,399 | \$5.41 | 3,432 | 0.15% | \$3.53 |
| | Job Seekers Age 18–24 + CDL Interest | \$8,499.64 | 2,520,783 | \$3.37 | 3,691 | 0.15% | \$2.30 |
| | Veterans | \$8,299.94 | 2,476,090 | \$3.35 | 3,019 | 0.12% | \$2.75 |
| Total | | \$41,999.25 | 9,574,551 | \$4.39 | 14,254 | 0.15% | \$2.95 |

By audience: mechanics

- **Auto Mechanics.** Despite showing the greatest interest (.16% CTR) among all audiences, this segment was significantly more expensive to reach (\$9.23 CPM) and motivate (\$5.93 CPC).
- **Age 18-24 job seekers with automotive interests** achieved the lowest CPC (\$3.18) and a competitive CPM (\$3.43), making this the most cost-efficient audience in the campaign. Overlaying the interest-based category on the job-seeker segment resulted in a 50% increase in CTR and a 26% decrease in CPC.
- **Veterans** were most cost-effective to reach (\$3.36 CPM) but had the lowest engagement (.09% CTR). Future campaigns should consider overlaying interest-based targeting to increase engagement.

Chart 6: Mechanic Campaign Performance Metrics

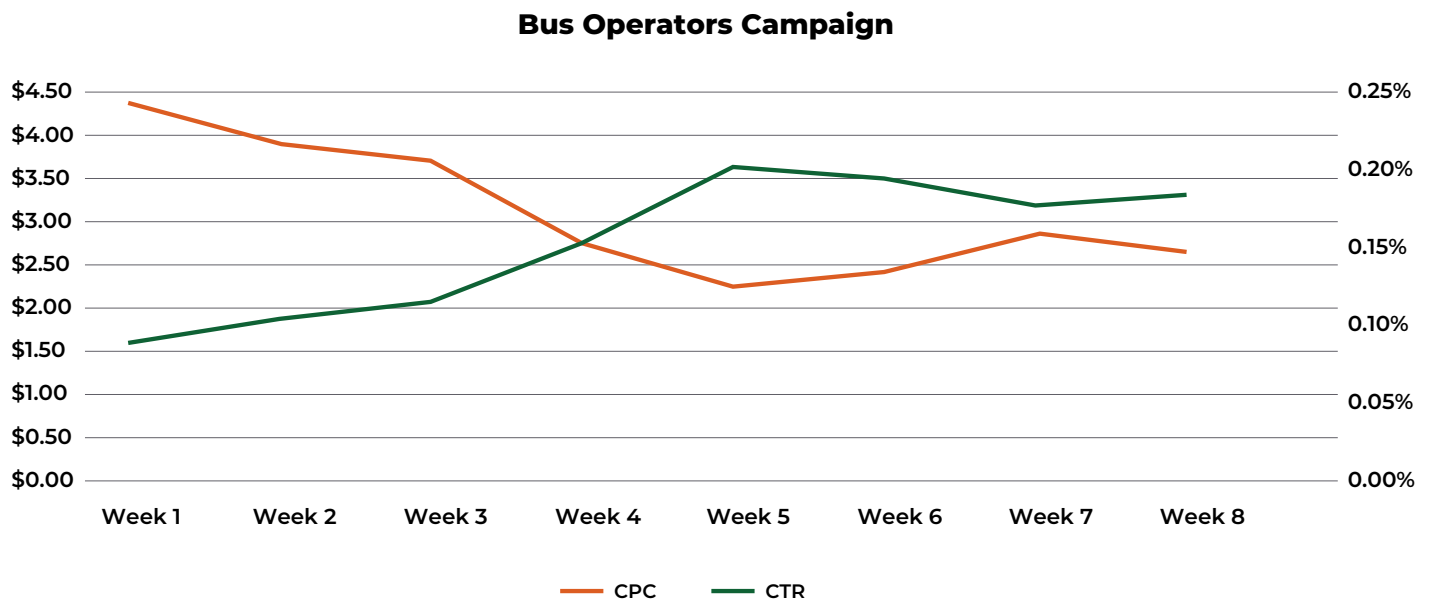
| Campaign | Audience | Spend | Impressions | CPM | Clicks | CTR | CPC |
|---------------|---|--------------------|------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Bus Mechanics | Auto Mechanics | \$13,000.19 | 1,407,922 | \$9.23 | 2,193 | 0.16% | \$5.93 |
| | Job Seeker Age 18-24 + Auto Mechanic Interest | \$7,500.17 | 2,184,679 | \$3.43 | 2,356 | 0.11% | \$3.18 |
| | Veterans | \$7,499.06 | 2,229,280 | \$3.36 | 1,998 | 0.09% | \$3.75 |
| Total | | \$27,999.43 | 5,821,881 | \$4.81 | 6,547 | 0.11% | \$4.28 |

Campaign optimization. Over the course of the ad campaign, TWC monitored advertising performance across platforms and audiences to focus its advertising budget on the most cost-effective approaches. This enabled the campaign to increase engagement over time by lowering costs.

- **Optimization strategies.** Mid-campaign optimizations drove marked improvements in efficiency and performance. These included:
 - Removing underperforming ad placements (e.g., Meta Reels)
 - Excluded low-performing websites/apps on programmatic channels to boost impression quality.
 - Prioritized high-performing devices like mobile to capitalize on audience engagement.

- **Efficiency improvements.** The campaign delivered notable improvements in engagement over time, driven primarily by shifting the budget from lower- to higher-performing channels and ad placements.
- **Operator campaign.** CTR rose from .07% in Week 1 to a peak of .21% by Week 5. Over the same period, CPC dropped from \$4.25 to \$2.20. By Week 8, CPC declined by 37% and CTR increased by 102% compared to the campaign launch.
- **Mechanic campaign.** CTR rose consistently, doubling from .06% in Week 1 to .14% by Week 5. CPC steadily dropped from \$4.90 in Week 1 to \$3.70 by Week 8.

Chart 7: Key Performance Indicators Over Time



CONCLUSION ON MARKETING DATA FINDINGS

The research and pilot campaign provide valuable insights into how communications can address current and future challenges related to perceptions of the transit industry and workforce recruitment.


This effort revealed that professionals in adjacent industries, as well as veterans and young people with relevant interests, skills, and employment outlooks, represent a cost-effective and high-yield target population for advertising. This campaign demonstrated the types of values and messages that are most likely to motivate consideration of a career in the industry, as well as the perceptions and barriers that communications will need to overcome to fill critical frontline jobs. This campaign has also established a model to approximate costs to achieve desired outcomes that the industry can use when planning future campaigns.

By considering the recommendations in this report, grounded in rigorous research and real-world campaign performance, the transit industry has additional information to support its work in most effectively reaching, engaging, and bringing potential candidates on board. Combining this information with existing resources helps us move forward in creating and implementing outreach and recruitment initiatives that build today's and tomorrow's transit workforce.





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