

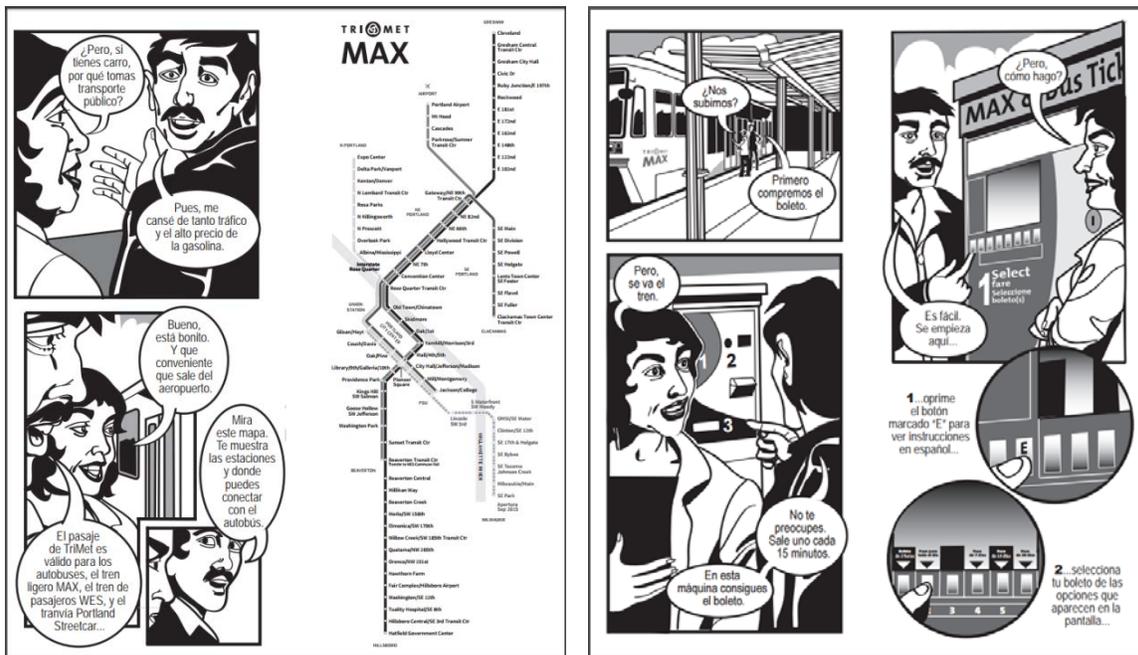
Innovations in Public Involvement
Structured Interview Report
TriMet's *Viaje Mejor*

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Interview Subjects: Martin Gonzalez (Manager of Multicultural Programs), Ginger Shank (Senior Research Analyst)

What it is: *Viaje Mejor* is a “how to ride” guide in the form of a graphic novella. Its primary objective is to provide basic rider information to Limited English Proficiency, Spanish-speaking riders in the Portland metro area in order to increase their access and use of TriMet’s transportation services. *Viaje Mejor* is the first graphic novella of its kind produced by a transit agency in the United States. It is distributed in Latino community stores, by social service organizations, and through public libraries, and used as a tool to educate new riders by Latino community organizations. Below are pages from *Viaje Mejor* that demonstrate the layout of the transit system and how to properly purchase a ticket at a kiosk.



Interest to NJTPA: Spanish-speaking focus group members expressed fear of engaging with face-to-face public outreach because of fraud, language concerns, and immigration status. Materials such as graphic novels can easily be passed on through friends and family members, and they allow readers to obtain information without engaging in person.

Major Takeaways:

1. **Comics are a culturally resonant medium for the Latino community:** While using comics to convey information may seem like a novel approach, it is actually common in Latin American countries. Putting transportation information in a medium that is familiar to the target audience increases the likelihood of widespread readership within that demographic.
2. **Comics are in line with information-sharing methods common among the Latino community:** Spanish speakers are less likely to seek out and share information through 'traditional' means; they tend to pass along information through in-person interactions with family and friends. Comics fit this pattern of information-sharing because they are compact, physical objects that can easily be shared after using.
3. **Low production and maintenance costs:** Initial costs include conducting focus groups, hiring an artist, and printing initial and revised copies. Maintenance costs are limited to printing more copies and conducting any feedback research deemed necessary.
4. **Simplicity, clarity, and emphasis on visuals should be favored over comprehensiveness:** The fact that the comic was brief, clear, and aimed exclusively at Spanish speakers resonated greatly with the intended audience. Extensive text with a great level of detail can muddle the message. Materials should emphasize visuals to keep the reader engaged and interested and to reinforce the written information.
5. **Engage a local artist who understands community sensibilities:** An artist with deep familiarity with the targeted community will understand what its members find engaging. A local artist can advise on content and language and can employ a culturally appropriate visual style.
6. **Difficult to collect specific data to evaluate effectiveness:** While TriMet saw an increase in ridership among LEPs and other Spanish speakers after implementing *Viaje Mejor*, they cannot empirically demonstrate the impact of the comic. An evaluation of the impact of the comic on ridership and ease of ridership was not included in the project plan. TriMet suggests using Textizen may be an effective way to solicit feedback from the targeted community.
7. **Comics are more effect for information distribution than information collection:** Informational comics are not ideal for engaging a targeted community in constructive dialogue. Integrating feedback mechanisms would be difficult and comics are not interactive. However, comics seem to be effective in conveying important information to certain communities that may not receive that information from more traditional mediums.

Discussion:

How did the idea for using a graphic novella come about?

Using comics to communicate with Spanish speakers is not necessarily an innovative idea. It is a medium that has been used for a while in Latin America. It is actually how I learned to read. Using more visuals than text to communicate is common in the Spanish-speaking community.

Viaje Mejor came about years ago when TriMet won a federal grant to create a pilot program to work with LEP communities. The graphic novella was developed out of discussions and focus groups with more than a dozen community groups, including the Mexican Consulate, who have a direct connection to LEP communities. They reviewed our existing materials, and they found them to be a bit cumbersome and not very useful. One recommendation was that we should be using comic books because many in the LEP community are used to that medium. I also had worked with the artist who did the drawings before, so that was a good resource.

In saying that comics are common in these communities, do you find that governments and other agencies use them or is it more common in recreational reading?

It is more common in recreational reading, but it is also common for CBOs to use them because it is a popular communication methodology.

In regard to the content, how did you decide what information would be included?

There is often a tendency with bureaucratic organizations to try and include everything. The initial test version included a lot of information because it was developed with input from CBOs and other agencies. However, when we tested it with riders, we modified the content to be simpler and include the basics of what they thought was important. We also added a section on safety because that became a priority for TriMet.

How did you go about collecting feedback?

Initially, we arranged meetings with CBOs and received feedback directly from them rather than going to individuals.

Did you offer any incentive or reward for participating?

We did offer organizations some free fares to distribute to their members in return for participating. However, most participation came about because we had developed relationships

with agencies within these communities and there was a need to communicate this information, so it was in everyone's best interest to participate and provide feedback.

How did you decide how many comics to distribute and where to distribute them?

We identified about 30,000 LEPs in our region, among a much larger overall Spanish-speaking population. From that we determined our initial printing, which was at least 10,000 copies if not 20,000 copies. Our initial distribution was on informational racks on buses and we also gave copies to CBOs who distributed them directly to community members they served. We also had them placed in stores where fares are sold. In addition, we distributed them at events we knew LEPs would be at such as Cinco de Mayo festivals. We used GIS to determine which areas had the highest concentration of our desired demographic and made sure to distribute them there. We also made use of libraries, public health centers, and churches.

What kinds of production costs did you have?

It wasn't a significant amount in terms of the development of the concept. We spent about \$2,000 on the drawings. Our internal graphics department in creative services did the layout, but most of the design was done by the artist. We had worked with him before, so we already knew it would be in a style that we wanted to use.

Did you have one version of Viaje Mejor or did you have different versions?

We just had one version, but when we got feedback from the initial version that it could use more clarity about how to use the machine for buying tickets and more info about the fare inspectors, we revamped it slightly.

Were you able to evaluate effectiveness in any way? For example monitoring any increases in ridership?

We know that there has been an increase in Latino ridership, but there isn't any way to specifically relate that to the literature. It's been more word of mouth affirmation from our contacts in the community that have convinced us of its value. We didn't have a research plan in place to evaluate its effectiveness. Maybe we should have, but it wasn't something in our plan.

To complement this tool and encourage more ridership, we also developed channel cards that had the same look as the comic to deal with fares, rules for riding, accessing interpretation services, etc. that we had on buses. We also increased bus benches at stops and took other measures to attract people in certain areas to riding, so those tactics may have had an effect as well. But there is no real hard evidence to certify the comics' exact effect.

One thing we did before developing the comic was conduct a telephone survey of 100 or 200 Latinos in Spanish and we asked about their level of awareness of transportation services. Perhaps we could have done a follow-up survey to see if awareness increased with the brochure.

Have you thought about using this in a way that you could collect information from readers rather than just distributing information?

We don't necessarily have the internal capacity to use this tool for that objective. To be honest, most public agencies do not try to engage a targeted demographic in a way that allows them to make any kind of difference in regard to what is being discussed. The only way to do that is to engage people directly in more group discussions. We have had the most success by putting a topic that is important to us on an agenda for a meeting being hosted by a community organization, rather than hosting our own meetings.

We did glean from our focus groups that the Latino community does not get information from what one might expect to be the usual sources. They tend to get information from friends, family, and schools. Often times, children get information at school and bring it home to their families who may not speak English. So the comic is a different way of sharing information that is more in tune with the tendencies of those communities.

Have you thought about combining the comic with something interactive such as Textizen?

The Latino definitely uses the telephone to communicate, so an idea like that could work. We haven't done anything as an agency along those lines though.

Has the concept been extended beyond transportation to other services such as health care or immigration services?

The concept of graphic novellas being used to transmit public information has been used somewhat widely because it has such resonance with the Latino community. It definitely can be an effective tool for any information that you want to disseminate.

Is this concept something that is geographically translatable?

It depends on the community, but comic books are prevalent in most of Latin America, perhaps read even more than regular books, so it should resonate with any Latino community regardless of where they've settled in the U.S.

Is the artist you worked with someone who does this kind of work freelance?

He lives in Costa Rica now, but he might be interested. There are a number of other options, though. A nearby county is doing similar artwork on billboards to conduct an awareness campaign about the dangers of smoking, and there are other artists doing similar work. You could probably find local artist who would be willing to do it. It would be good to find an artist from the community you are targeting so that the style is something familiar and recognizable. It's also important to use words and lingo that the audience can identify with. Having an artist

Personally, I think our graphics are great, but it is too text-heavy. We were trying to replace a how-to-ride brochure that had 6 languages, which was too big and had too many words. Our goal was to develop something that was much more portable and could easily be passed onto somebody else. Also, the focus was on being brief and keeping the information being conveyed simple and clear.

Is there anything you would recommend to an agency that wants to use this idea?

Try not to be too wordy. You have to keep in mind that what the agency wants to communicate is from an English-speaking perspective, and something can be lost in translation. You must try to keep the perspective of the community you are targeting throughout the whole process in order for it to be effective. Also, testing trial versions with the users to gauge appropriateness is a key to success.

One weakness we had was that there was decision-making interference by other offices and departments. For instance, we wanted to use information racks on trains and buses to distribute the comic, but higher level administration made a decision to remove those information racks because many of the materials were ending up as garbage on the floor, which would be sucked up by vacuum cleaners and wasted. So rather than deal with training staff to pick up the brochures and put them back on the racks, they simply decided to get rid of the racks. This took away a major distribution point for our work.

How did you try to account for the numerous demographics within the targeted audience?

We took a middle-ground approach by using semi-formal language because we assumed the average user might be older rather than younger. We used neutral language, but we were also aware that the majority of LEPs in this are Mexicans, so we slightly tailored content to their sensibilities.