

**SITUATION:** Seattle suffers from some of the most expensive commutes in the nation – while it's the 18<sup>th</sup> largest U.S. city by population, it is ranked the 7<sup>th</sup> most expensive for commutes. Residents of the metro area spend an average of 28 minutes commuting at a whopping average annual cost of \$9,790. What's worse, the cost burden of transportation falls the hardest on lowest income families; lower income households spent a whopping 30% of their after-tax income on transportation in 2022.

With no way to build out of the problem, in 2022 the state legislature passed Move Ahead Washington, one of the most progressive transportation packages in the country, making a record investment in transit, bicycling, and walking infrastructure and services. It also made Washington the first state in the country to offer free public transit for all riders ages 18 and under, including transit, ferries, and passenger rail throughout the state.

While this landmark program had the potential to lower transportation costs for families and create access to opportunity for a new generation of transit riders, the quick passage of legislation meant that local governments had to act fast to encourage youth ridership. In Seattle, King County Metro, the eighth-largest transit bus agency in the U.S., scrambled to swiftly put together an outreach campaign to reach kids as they returned to school in the fall. While the quick-turn "Phase I" campaign started spreading awareness, Metro went into 2023 wanting to take more time to thoughtfully put together a Phase II campaign that would truly resonate with the region's youth and extend to the larger four-county metro area.

**RESEARCH & PLANNING:** The team identified a primary audience of teens aged 13-18 in the metro area – the age group most likely to be able to take transit without a parent – particularly youth of color and youth from low-income households. In order to create new, highly resonant campaign creative, the team convened a teen focus group to provide input on past creative and understand what would resonate in a new campaign. The focus group provided the following key insights:

1. Teens wanted to hear from their peers and did not want to be "told what to do" by adults. They would not be receptive to a campaign that felt like it came from the government.
2. The main theme that interested them was freedom and the ability to go places on their own. They did not understand the emphasis on the transit pass in the Phase I campaign.
3. Destinations that well-meaning adults might want them to go, such as art museums, did not resonate. The main places they wanted to go to via transit were to see friends, school, work, and after-school activities like sports or clubs.

The project team also took a deep dive into desktop research on the primary audience. Key insights revealed a shift among teens in delaying getting their driver's licenses due to anxiety, financial challenges, and environmental concerns. Research also underscored that Gen Zers lead busy lives and are more likely to have daily interactions online than in person. Furthermore, to combat mental health challenges faced by Gen Zers, the CDC has recommended improving students' sense of connectedness and inclusivity.

Leveraging these insights, the project team developed a digitally-focused campaign that highlighted themes of financial savings, environmental stewardship, and the freedom public transit provides in connecting teens to all the places they need to go. The team developed a youth-talking-to-youth creative approach, including a unique tagline emphasizing the theme of freedom: "Go all the places. Do all the things."

Recognizing parents as a secondary audience, the team found that parents of Gen Zers generally reject the concept of "helicopter" parenting and encourage their kids to be more independent and try new things. The team leveraged this finding by focusing messaging for this audience around the convenience of not having to chauffeur kids and the opportunity to build their kid's independence.

Based on these insights, the team developed initial static ads, then conducted A/B testing on Facebook and Instagram to set the final campaign direction. Based on the insights from the research and testing phase, the team developed a campaign plan that would include ads on the highest-ranked channels for saturation among 13-17 year-olds, including YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitch. Micro-influencer partnerships were designed to reach teen and parent audiences separately and authentically. Other wraparound outreach would include organic social, community events outreach, on-bus announcements, and transit ads.

The objectives of the video campaign were:

1. Objective 1: Spread awareness by driving 10 million impressions for the overall campaign and 2.5 million completed video views.
2. Objective 2: Drive engagement through the POV video content and garner 200,000 engagements.

3. Objective 3: Send youth and parents to FreeYouthTransitPass.com to learn more about riding transit in the region, driving an average of 582 daily web visits during the campaign (twice as many as the Phase I average.)

EXECUTION: The campaign used a robust mix of outreach tactics to reach teens and parents where they already are, including advertising, events outreach, transit ads and on-board announcements, and more.

The centerpiece of the campaign were two point-of-view (POV) videos featuring a “day in the life” approach, filmed vertically and produced to look like content a teen might post online ([videos viewable here](#)). The videos emphasized the themes of freedom and independence this audience craves, focusing on destinations teens want to go. In one video, a teen enjoyed music and reading on their way to a soccer game, while another showed a teen using transit to shop and then head to work. To ensure the reels looked like authentic user-generated content, they were filmed from the point of view of the “creator” with only brief shots of the teens on screen. The reels were also filmed in a range of authentic locations, including Metro buses, the teens’ homes, and in urban and suburban areas. Local teens of color were cast to ensure representation and the video team worked closely with the teens to ensure the script and activities felt natural and relevant.

These videos were a significant departure from the style of the agency’s past videos, and from the Phase I campaign creative, which focused more on the transit pass. Rather than sharing enthusiasm for the transit pass itself, these videos focused on the bigger benefit expressed by youth - where transit can take you. These were the agency’s first vertical video ads and first UGC-style videos.

BUDGET: The POV video production budget was \$40,943; the total four-county ad buy was \$209,496.

CHALLENGES: The videos would be promoted throughout four counties that encompass 77 cities and towns, eight different transit agencies (each with their own branding), and a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas. It would be a challenge to ensure the videos would feel relevant to youth and parents in these vastly different environments. This was addressed by shooting the videos in a mix of urban and suburban areas; selecting locations that felt “Northwest-y” but didn’t show specific Seattle landmarks; and shooting transit with careful angles that didn’t show too much of the bus’s (Seattle-specific) colors and branding. Additionally, at the time of the campaign, many local governments were shying away from TikTok, and Metro was not allowed to run the videos on TikTok or allow influencers to post campaign content on TikTok. Because youth influencers are typically found on TikTok, this platform limitation required the team conducted a robust, but successful search for a local youth influencer who had a significant Instagram following and who would be a good fit for promoting free youth transit.

EVALUATION: Targeting teens and parents in King, Kitsap, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties, the Free Youth Transit Pass Campaign (Phase II) ran from May 22-June 12. Leveraging TV, digital, audio, and in-person channels and the reach of eight partner agencies across the four counties, the campaign was a success and exceeded every objective:

1. Objective 1: Spread awareness by driving 10 million impressions for the overall campaign and 2.5 million completed video views.  
RESULT: Earned over 22.4 million total impressions and 3.6 million total completed video views. Media tactics alone accounted for approximately 88% more impressions than in Phase I, with only 35% more budget.
2. Objective 2: Drive engagement through the POV video content and garner 200,000 engagements.  
RESULT: The POV reels amassed over 242,000 engagements on social media, with many people tagging their friends.
3. Objective 2: Send youth and parents to FreeYouthTransitPass.com to learn more about riding transit in the region, driving an average of 582 daily web visits during the campaign (twice as many as the Phase I average.)  
RESULT: Attracted 990 average visits per day to FreeYouthTransitPass.com—340% more average visits per day than in Phase 1 and approximately 700% more than when the campaign was inactive.

Other campaign successes included engaging with over 1,200 people at events and distributing over 300 rack cards and nearly 500 promotional items.

The campaign was effective due to a youth-driven creative approach that shared the benefits of free transit in their own words and matched native content, coupled with a precise targeting strategy that reached youth and their parents through their most frequented channels, and a surround-sound approach reaching the audiences through a wide variety of methods.