Barriers to Becoming a Transportation Champion

A TDM Best Practice from Arlington, Virginia
Arlington County, Va., is frequently cited as a national leader in the public-transportation industry – specifically with its innovative work within the practices of transportation demand management (TDM) and transit-oriented development (TOD). Encouraging a focus on making it easy for people rather than simply “throughput of vehicles” has been a local hallmark and guiding light for many years.

A major element of the county’s TDM work has been through Arlington Transportation Partners (ATP), which works closely with employers, commercial and residential properties, hotels and schools to make sure people associated with those places know about their many transportation options in Arlington and throughout the Washington D.C., region.

“Champions” is an ATP program that has particularly picked up steam in recent years, and Mobility Lab thinks the kinds of questions it asked in the surveys and focus groups as part of its examination to make sure it is addressing any barriers to success are a clearly effective formula for TDM success – a potential blueprint for many other places.

This short report is not intended to spotlight ATP’s very detailed strategy, but rather to give an idea of the kind of deep examination of a local population that is needed to truly understand base transportation demand and behavior before and while carrying out a plan to provide excellent cost savings for TDM projects.

ATP offers Champions to provide rewards and local, regional and state recognition to organizations that implement programs that support the use of non-drive-alone modes of transportation in Arlington County, Va.

As one of the ways to know and understand its clients exceptionally well, ATP convened focus groups consisting of representatives from its four principal client groups to discover how they perceive ATP and the Champions program, as well as to identify barriers to joining the Champions program and moving up the achievement ladder, which runs from Bronze through Platinum status.

Focus group participants were drawn from commercial properties, employers, residential properties, and schools. For each type of client, Mobility Lab worked with ATP to conduct one focus group with representatives from Champion organizations and one focus group with organizations that had not joined or who had left the program.

We discovered that while the Champions brand is held in high regard, non-Champions often feel that their organizations are not equipped to join. Champions believe they lack the resources to move from one level to a higher one. This feedback convinced ATP it must give clients the tools they need to join the Champions program and reassure clients that achieving Platinum status is feasible.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Key Findings

- Focus group participants perceived the Champions brand as very high-end, causing some to feel that the brand may be too sophisticated for their organization.
Barriers to Becoming a Transportation Champion

- Smaller employers are sheepish about joining Champions. They feel that it is more for the “big employer.” They especially felt this way about the Platinum level of the Champions program.
- Participants mentioned that when ATP is pitching new Champions, it may be helpful to present them with a case study profiling a Champion company similar to the prospect in size and type.
- Participants want to be able to display a Champions seal on their website and through social media, or even in a window of their building. They feel displaying a Champions logo would function like a LEED or Energy Star logo to portray them to the community in a positive light and might help them attract talented employees and quality tenants.

Some Key Recommendations by ATP Client Type

Commercial Properties

- **Sustainable Designation Goals:** Include some of the requirements for LEED, FMA and other well-respected certifications in the requirements for Champions program achievement levels because the industry certifications are highly valued.
- **Share Statistics:** Provide data regarding the environmental impact of not driving and information about other commercial properties that are enrolled in Champions and at what level in order to dispel the misconception that the Champions program is only for newer buildings.
- **Champions as a Marketing Tool:** Inform commercial property managers about how joining Champions can help them attract and retain tenants.
- **Recognition:** Ask commercial property managers if they would prefer to have their building’s developer and/or owner recognized as a Champions program participant.

Employers

- **Share Statistics:** Providing employers data on how joining the Champions program could benefit their bottom lines has shifted employee behavior, attracted talented employees, and positively impacted the environment would spur greater enrollment.
- **Clear Up Misconceptions:** Work to change the misperception that the Champions program is only meant for large businesses.
- **Network:** Reach out to employers who lease space in buildings managed by commercial properties that participate in the Champions program.

Residential Properties

- **Clear Up Misconceptions:** Create educational materials to highlight the benefits for residents from enrolling in the Champions program and to dispel misconceptions that the program is not for their buildings and that the upgrades older residential properties may need to make to become compliant will be quite costly.
- **Hold Community-Oriented Events:** Hold more Earth Day and Bike to Work Day-type events to raise enthusiasm for participating in the Champions program.
- **Sell Champions Program Participation as a Marketing Tool:** Coach residential property managers on how to use their building’s Champions program status to attract and retain residents.
Barriers to Becoming a Transportation Champion

Educators

- **Expand Program**: Expand the Champions program from school staff to include students and parents while recognizing that getting students involved will encourage parent to get involved.
- **Tailor Communications and Rewards**: Develop and deliver messages and rewards specifically for staff, students, and parents.
- **Offer Safety Training**: While acknowledging that parents create traffic congestion problems at schools, encourage the safe use of alternate transportation by students.
- **Share Statistics**: Provide data on the environmental and health benefits of not driving with staff, students, and parents.
- **Offer Community-Building Rewards**: Consider providing nonmonetary rewards such as bagels and coffee for meeting incremental Champions goals. The events at which such rewards are conferred would double as community-building opportunities.

Background of the project

Arlington Transportation Partners has more than 800 clients, and it averages annual growth of 10 percent. ATP launched the Champions recognition and reward program in 2013 and held three focus groups at the end of that year to determine clients’ attitudes and perceptions toward ATP’s services, as well the clients’ current and future needs.

Since the initial focus groups, the Champions program expanded to include commercial properties, multifamily residential communities, and educators. A category for hotels was added, as well. With expansion, program staff identified the need to receive more-current feedback from clients in recently added programs and from Arlington County Commuter Services’ ATP Employer Program.

Although enrollment in the Champions program has increased each year, ATP is continuously challenged by organizations that do not join or fail to re-enroll. Thus, understanding the barriers to joining and remaining in the Champions program was the reason for the most-recent round of focus groups.

Methodology

A total of eight focus groups (two groups per night) were conducted on October 16-18, 2017, and again on November 6 the same year. Each night, one group of Champions and one group of non-Champions met. Each session lasted 90 minutes, and all focus groups occurred in the Mobility Lab, which serves as the offices for ATP.

Focus group members had to be individuals who oversee transportation programs and initiatives for their organizations. In addition, participants in the Champion groups had to represent organizations that were then enrolled in the program.

Each participant from a commercial property, employer, or residential property received $100. Educators received a $150 incentive to participate.

The eight groups were separated by client type, with two groups for commercial properties (Champions and non-Champions), two groups for employers (Champions and non-Champions), two
groups for residential properties (Champions and non-Champions), and two groups for educators (Champions and non-Champions).

Of the participants who were not current Champions, 15 were from organizations that had never joined and nine were from organizations that were considered prospects for joining the program.

Employer representatives held the most diverse job titles, but most were typically in human resources, operations, or administration. Focus group participants representing educators were usually but not always principals.

As stated in the grant from the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation used to fund the focus groups, the goal of this research was to determine the barriers to joining the Champions program. Facilitators guided participants through discussions of the following topics:

- Transportation as an issue
- Awareness and familiarity with Arlington Transportation Partners
- Monetizing Arlington Transportation Partners
- Communications about and awareness of the Champions program
- Barriers to joining the Champions program
- Barriers to advancing up the Champions program achievement ladder
- Rewards assessment, and
- Organizational decision-making processes regarding Champions program participation.