

# Using Travel Ambassadors to Promote Sustainable Transportation

## Overview

Travel ambassadors—spokespeople for active and sustainable transportation—have been shown to be an effective way to change people’s travel behaviours.

Programs that use travel ambassadors traditionally use employees, contractors or volunteers to conduct home visits, deliver information packages and provide tips and other resources to people who wish to adopt more sustainable transportation modes. Metro Vancouver, for example, contracted customer information clerks from a bus company and cyclists from a local cycling coalition to act as ambassadors for its *TravelSmart* program.

But travel ambassadors are not always directly linked to a particular program or organization. In fact, anyone who personally advocates for sustainable transportation can be a travel ambassador.

This issue paper examines how different types of travel ambassadors can be used to promote transportation behaviour change.

## Resources

**Edelman Trust Barometer 2010.**

[http://www.scribd.com/full/26268655?access\\_key=key-1ovbgbpawoooot3hnsz3u](http://www.scribd.com/full/26268655?access_key=key-1ovbgbpawoooot3hnsz3u)

Transport Canada. *Role of Community-based Social Marketing in Supporting Active and Sustainable Transportation.*

<http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/programs/environment-utsp-commsocialmarketing-839.htm>

## Introduction

Changing habits is a tough thing to do. Ask any smoker who has ever tried to quit, or the dieter who wants to lose a few pounds. Habits take a long time to develop and changing them is not something that can be done overnight.

Fostering changes to travel behaviours is an especially difficult task. Driving is often seen as the most efficient way to meet most people’s travel needs and the supremacy of the car is rarely challenged. In fact, more

than 80% of all Canadians travel to work by car as drivers or passengers, a figure that hasn’t changed much since the mid 1980s (Statistics Canada).

Sustainable transportation program managers use a variety of tools to encourage behaviour change. One of these is travel ambassadors—people who can speak to the health, environmental and financial issues related to sustainable transportation in a way that resonates with the target audience.

Travel ambassadors can be experts and authority figures (doctors, teachers and athletes, etc.) whose opinions are respected by the wider community. But they can also be everyday folk, such as your neighbours, work colleagues, friends or family members, or indeed anyone who is part of a similar community as the target audience.

## Personalized travel marketing

Travel ambassadors are often used in programs that offer individualized or personalized travel marketing.

In these types of programs, travel ambassadors deal directly with people who are interested in changing their travel behaviour.

In Metro Vancouver’s *TravelSmart* program, for example, travel ambassadors visited a person’s home, reviewed their current travel habits, and prepared a customized travel plan. The plan included tips and information (maps, transit guides, etc.) on different sustainable transportation modes as well as specific information on the services available in the area.

## Why it works

Studies show that people are more receptive to behaviour changes when they receive personalized, one-on-one attention that takes into account their own situations, needs and barriers.

For example, in the *TravelSmart* program, piloted in Metro Vancouver over a 13-month period between 2005 and 2006, more than 3,500 people participated. Travel ambassadors met with individuals at their own homes and offered personalized trip planning assistance. In a case study of the program, program managers noted that “direct contact and individualized information, tailored

to meet households' specific travel needs, [was] an effective means to encourage people to think about their travel choices." Once the pilot was complete, survey results indicated that participants' car use dropped by 8%, walking increased by 9%, public transit increased by 12%, and cycling increased by 33%.

Unlike personalized travel marketing where a travel ambassador is often an employee or volunteer with a sustainable transportation program, this issue paper examines several programs that use non-traditional travel ambassadors and the lessons that can be learned from them. These ambassadors come from many different walks of life, but all share a common goal: to promote the use of more active and sustainable modes of transportation.

## Programs, examples and ideas

Virtually anyone who advocates for active and sustainable transportation can be a travel ambassador. Most of the programs listed in this section used well-known authority figures (doctors, athletes, celebrities, etc.), but some used local residents and students to get the message across.

### Clean Air Champions engage youth in using more sustainable modes of transportation

Canadians have great affection for their athletes, particularly Olympians. The Clean Air Champions (CAC) builds on that affection by working with athletes to motivate and educate Canadians to adopt more sustainable lifestyles.



One of the CAC's programs, the HSBC Clean Air Achievers, covers a variety of healthy living topics including active and sustainable transportation. The program is aimed at students in Grades 6-12, but any organization can request a Clean Air Champion presentation.

#### *How it works*

The program begins with a visit by a Canadian athlete who teaches the students about the science behind climate change, the effects of air pollution and how travel choices affect local air quality and the environment. The program also offers a website that allows students to record their travel trips and see how they could reduce their emissions by choosing more sustainable modes of transportation. The athlete then returns for a second time a month later to see what changes the students have made.

Tricia Zakaria, program manager, says that one of the goals of the program is to educate youth about their

transportation choices before they become adults. "We show them that there are better ways of getting around."

More than 150 Canadian athletes are involved as Clean Air Champions. Prior to making a presentation, each athlete is trained in classroom management and speaking tips. After the second presentation, students and teachers are asked to fill out an exit survey.

Zakaria says that athletes make perfect role models for youth. "What I like about using Canadian athletes is that their passion really shines through because of the amount of dedication they've had to put into their athletic careers," she says. "They bring stories of overcoming obstacles and breaking down barriers, which is what we want to inspire the students to do."

Teachers agree. Of 50 exit surveys from the 2009 school year, 91% of teachers said that the program had a positive effect on their students; of 350 student exit surveys, 83% said that the athlete visit made them try harder to be a Clean Air Achiever.

"All people—not just students—need motivation, someone to inspire them," says Zakaria. "If it's coming from someone well-respected, not just some random person, it makes a huge difference."

*When I recently did a journal with my students about what was their most memorable event this year, the athlete visit topped the list.*

*It's wonderful to have students see a pro athlete concerned about the environment. They're more likely to listen to the message than if it came from a teacher or a parent.*

*—Quotes from 2009 CAC teacher exit survey*

#### *Measuring the impact*

In the 2009-2010 school year more than 6,000 Grade 6-9 students in eight provinces took part in the Clean Air Achievers program. As a result of the athlete's visit, many of these students began using more active modes of transportation.

Measuring the longer-term affects of the CAC's programs is more difficult but anecdotal evidence suggests that the students exposed to the Clean Air Achievers program take the athletes' messages to heart.

Valérie Hould-Marchant, a 1996 Olympic silver medalist in synchronized swimming, offers an example.

"I commit to the students by saying that I choose not to use my car all week long. I work downtown and it takes me 40 minutes to walk there and back. I say I will only use my car once a week to do all my errands," she says.

That commitment resonated with one group of students at a school in North York where 83% of the students

began using zero-energy modes of transportation to get to and from school, at least part of the week. “It was amazing,” she says, “they got the whole school involved, had a concert, and even wrote their own song about it.”

She says that the biggest barrier for students is that they don’t have much choice in how they get to and from school. “So I focus on what they can do outside of school. If you’re going to visit a friend, calculate how far away it is before asking for a drive. It may only be a kilometre away.”

Hould-Marchant says that once the students start writing down their distances and the mode they use they begin to realize how close things are. “I can then start to talk about getting the whole family involved so that the student can be the one to say to their mother ‘You know what Mum, let’s walk to the store.’”

*My mom says that we can’t change the world in the blink of an eye. We all have to come together and help out. We all want to live for as long as we can, but if we can’t because of air pollution then we know something is wrong. My family got more active. Instead of driving to the grocery store we walk or bike because it isn’t that far.*

*—Quote from a 2009 CAC student exit survey*

#### *Telling their own stories*

Zakaria says that many of the Champions have health issues, such as asthma, and are encouraged to share their own health experiences in their presentations. “Because the messages of active living and sustainable transportation are so intertwined, a lot of our athletes bring personal experiences about being active and having to train and compete in areas with poor air quality,” says Zakaria.

One such athlete is John Hastings, the 2008 Canadian National Champion in kayaking, and an asthmatic.

“When I was in Beijing in 2007 the sky was like grey silt,” he says. “Doing something to improve air quality was part of the reason I got involved with the Clean Air Champions.”

He says that the way the program is set up—with two presentations spaced a month apart—lets him see directly how his story has had an effect. “It’s cool to come in for the second ‘celebratory’ visit and see what changes the kids have made,” he says. “Some of the kids start biking and they say it gives them a sense of independence. They’re not asking their parents for rides as much.”

#### **Doctors prescribe active transportation for better health**

Doctors and other medical professionals are on the front-line of preventative health care issues. They see,

first hand, the effects that a sedentary lifestyle has on their patients and many are now beginning to promote active transportation as a way to reverse some lifestyle-related diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, obesity and Type II diabetes.

The UK’s Climate and Health Council offers a list of 10 practical actions that doctors can take to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, while improving the health of patients. One of the actions is to encourage patients to use more active modes of transportation.

“Doctors must lead by example on climate change,” writes Professor Mike Gill of the University of Surrey, UK. “Health professionals were powerful catalysts in changing society’s view of smoking and they must do the same for climate change.”

The following examples show how physicians can act as travel ambassadors—both directly, in terms of counseling patients to become more active, and indirectly as supporters of active transportation infrastructure.

#### **Active Steps recruits doctors to promote active transportation**

The *Active Steps* pilot program in Sutton, England ran from 2008 to 2009. Its goal was to increase the physical activity levels of residents by promoting walking and cycling and, by doing so, change the modal split from single occupant driving to more sustainable modes.

Sutton’s National Health Service (NHS) initiated the program in partnership with Transport for London. NHS Sutton believed that the program would be more effective if they employed the “white coat effect,” i.e., where people are more likely to change their lifestyle if encouraged by their doctor. They therefore engaged a number of health professionals to participate, including 29 general practitioners.

The target audience was people aged 35-64 who were drivers, overweight and parents. Participating doctors were asked to select which of their patients might benefit the most from and be most receptive to the program. Lee Parker, the *Smarter Travel Sutton* (STS) program coordinator, says that doctors were initially unsure of the value of the program and feared that the project might be short-lived or compete with other existing health initiatives. A local doctor was asked to chair the project board and ensured that doctors’ interests were represented. Physicians were also offered a small one-time payment to offset administrative costs.

Patients then met with their doctor for an initial screening and to see if they would be interested in participating. If they chose to participate, the patient attended a 30-minute motivational interview with an *Active Steps* advisor, which was then followed by a 12-week support program.



As part of the program, each patient received information packages, access to free bicycle training, a pedometer, weekly motivational postcards or text messages, and individualized support from an advisor.

In all, 1,062 people took part. After 12 weeks,

95% of patients reported being more physically active; 61% had made a permanent change in the way they travel; 87% said they felt generally healthier; 43% had lost weight; and 52% had reduced their car use.

*Active Steps* was one segment of the three-year £5 million STS integrated travel marketing program.

“Our aim was to encourage residents to travel more sustainability, which has the wider benefits of reducing traffic congestion, improving health, supporting the local economy and reducing emissions,” says Parker.

Almost two-thirds of the 80,000 residents visited either spoke with one of the STS travel ambassadors about traveling sustainably, became involved with the *Active Steps* program or requested supporting information such as personalized travel information and incentives.

At the end of the three years, the STS program (which includes the results from *Active Steps*) showed a 6% decrease in residents using cars, a 75% increase in people cycling, and a 16% increase in the number of people traveling by bus.

### Promoting active living in Switzerland

Similar to *Active Steps*, *Move for Health and the Environment* was a 2009 a pilot project in the northwestern part of Switzerland that studied how counseling could help patients become more active.

Primary care physicians were invited to participate through mailings, journal articles, presentations at meetings and personal contact with other doctors. Forty-four doctors ended up participating.

The study followed almost 5,000 patients aged 16-65. Patients first completed a screening questionnaire and were then counseled by their physician. Patients received an information leaflet and a voucher for physical activity

counseling sessions; one year later, the patients were asked to complete the same questionnaire.

Of the 1,239 patients who returned the questionnaire, 37% met the threshold of sufficient physical activity (30 minutes per day) and 23% reported an increase of almost 59 minutes of moderate and almost 35 minutes of vigorous activity, much of which was spent walking and cycling.

The researchers concluded that it was the counseling that patients received from their primary health care providers that encouraged them the most to adopt a more active lifestyle. But they also note that, for long-term change, physicians and other health care providers must be prepared to make counseling an ongoing part of their interactions with patients.

### Nova Scotia doctors advocate for active transportation infrastructure

Travel ambassadors don’t just influence the general public. They can also inspire decision makers to take a closer look at their sustainable transportation needs and, in some cases, help to remove some of the barriers to active and sustainable transportation.

Unlike the hands-on intervention of doctors in Switzerland and the UK, *Doctors Nova Scotia* (DNS) takes a less direct way of encouraging patients to use more sustainable modes of transportation.

“As an organization we have to lead by example, so we are a member of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities where we encourage municipal governments to improving walking and cycling infrastructure,” explains Dr. Jane Brooks, President of DNS. “Two years ago we also passed a resolution at our annual general meeting to recognize that walking and cycling form the basis of a physically active culture and that we support the promotion of active transportation infrastructure.”



Brooks says that one of DNS’s core activities is to communicate with the public. “We write lots of letters to the editor and talk to people in the community,” she says.

DNS also runs several physical activity programs, mainly aimed at youth, such as the Youth for Fun running program (a free program provided to all

schools in the province) and sponsors a bicycle tour.

“We have 10,000 kids in Youth for Fun,” says Brooks, explaining that students run 38 kilometres throughout the school year and then cap it off with a 4.2 km fun run at the end of the school year.

The Heartland Tour involves a team of cyclists—including a core group of doctors—who cycle through eight Nova Scotia communities. An internal medical specialist started the tour as a way to raise awareness of cardiac disease.

### **Association of Doctors for the Advancement of Physically-active Transportation (ADAPT)**

ADAPT is a loose organization of 50 physicians in Nova Scotia who promote active transportation through their own individual efforts. Their goal is to prevent health problems that come with inactivity, rather than simply react to them.

Although the ADAPT doctors do counsel their individual patients about the benefits of active transportation, they believe that their influence is best used to encourage local governments to create built environments that encourage non-motorized, people-powered transportation. ADAPT doctors therefore work with their local municipalities to develop active transportation facilities such as bike lanes, multi-use trails, safe routes to school, bike parking and workplace lockers and shower rooms.

Dr. Chris Milburn, an emergency room doctor in Sydney, NS, has been involved with ADAPT since its inception.

Milburn says that he actively encourages his patients to be more physically active, but notes that that is only a small part of what the whole health care system should be doing to be ambassadors for more active transportation.

“There’s a parallel with smoking cessation programs,” he says. “Those programs used to be geared at the individual but that only went so far before it stalled.” Milburn says that it wasn’t until public health authorities came on board and asked to have smoking banned in public places that the number of smokers declined dramatically.

He believes the same methods can be used to increase levels of active transportation. “You can beat a patient over the head to bike, but when they look out their door and see cars everywhere and no place to ride, they’ll drive,” he says. “Similar to the path we took with the smoking cessation programs, we’re now realizing that there is a public health side to active transportation infrastructure.”

In a 2009 article, *A prescription for health*, Milburn and fellow doctor, Dr. Keith MacCormick write, “Recent

research suggests that the built environment has more impact on rates of physical activity in a community than the availability of soccer fields and hockey rinks. Urban planners now refer to communities as ‘obese-ogenic’ if they lack one fundamental ingredient—infrastructure for active transportation.”

Milburn is the president of his local bicycle club and works closely with his municipality on its transportation plans. “The first time I went to speak with councilors about active transportation many didn’t know what I meant. It wasn’t surprising—our rates of active transportation are hideously low,” he says. “But after five years of hard work, things are starting to change. Now, all of the councilors can tell you what active transportation is all about.”

In 2006, the Nova Scotia Department of Health Promotion and Protection recognized ADAPT as a program that could be used as a best practice in increasing the awareness of how health problems are related to car dependence.

### **National association promotes active living**

In 1997, the College of Family Physicians of Canada ran the *Doctors Promoting Active Living* (DPAL) program as a national pilot project to recognize the need for health professionals to advocate for active living.

“DPAL was a way for us to assemble champions across Canada,” says Patricia Marturano of the College. Physicians who would promote physical activity in their community and help city planners plan for better active transportation infrastructure were nominated in every province. The College then developed resources that the doctors could use, such as evidence-based presentations and tips on how to counsel patients to become more active.

Although the program lost funding many of the doctors initially involved with it continue to advocate for active living within their communities.

Dr. Kevin Saunders, a family physician in Winnipeg, was one of the physicians involved.

“DPAL was a grassroots project where we tackled various issues in our community wherever we saw we could exert influence,” he says. Busing children, says Saunders, was a big issue for him so he worked with his local school to bring in a Walking School bus program.

When it comes to counseling his patients, Saunders says that he takes a gentle approach. “I tell them that they don’t have to throw on some Spandex and go to the gym. Instead, I tell them to look for opportunities to exercise, like walking to work or the grocery store.”

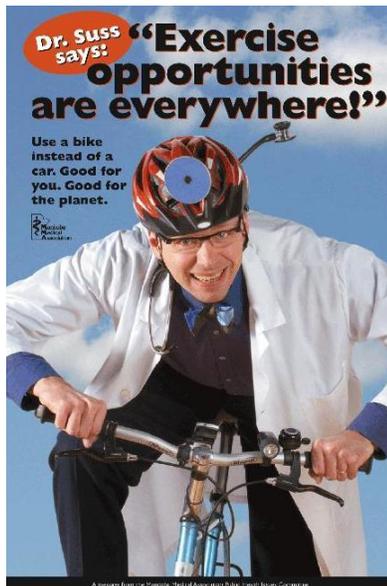
Dr. Roger Suss, who cycles to his family practice in Winnipeg every day, was also involved with DPAL.

"I received a binder full of information from the College that had some very useful summaries and background information that explained the data," he says. "I was also able to use some of the techniques that other people have used to promote active transportation."

One of those techniques involved looking for moments when people are open to change. "Often when people have developed a new medical problem that may come as a shock to them, such as diabetes or hypertension, they're open to making lifestyle changes," says Suss. "Some of my patients who were diagnosed with diabetes made changes and through their actions their diabetes has gone into remission."

*Pictured at right: Dr. Roger Suss lends his image to a series of healthy living posters offered free of charge from Doctors Manitoba.*

Suss is now involved with *Doctors Manitoba* (similar to *Doctors Nova Scotia* referred to above), a voluntary group of health care professionals who promote active living.



Being a travel ambassador for his patients is an ongoing process for Suss. "Even if someone starts, they may relapse, so you have to encourage them each time you see them."

Suss says that he can only do so much. More permanent changes will come, he says, with the addition of infrastructure that supports active transportation.

"I'm very excited to see that active transportation is an issue that has taken off across the country and that municipalities, including Winnipeg, are putting money into it," he says. "It's good to see urban planning changing direction. There's good evidence that if you improve infrastructure people will use it more, but if municipalities continue to plan their cities with the car in mind and no sidewalks, then lifestyle issues like obesity become a self-fulfilling prophecy."

### **Canadian Medical Association (CMA)**

In 2006, the CMA's general council voted 95% in favour of a motion to request that physicians discuss environmental issues, including the health benefits of

using active transportation, with their patients. The CMA's view is that promoting environmental sustainability has direct co-benefits for health, fits well within the physician's role, and is simple good preventative medicine.

The CMA has also developed a policy and other resources that professionals can use to build the case for more active transportation in their communities.

Its *Active Transportation* policy, for example, urges all sectors "to work together, as a matter of priority, to create a culture in their communities that supports and encourages active transportation." The policy calls on



governments to commit to long-term plans for active transportation networks and require that active transportation be part of all infrastructure renewal projects. A full copy of the CMA Policy on Active Transportation can be found at:

<http://nspact.ca/docs/CMA%20AT%20policy%20English1.pdf>.

### **Celebrities add their names to Swedish cycling campaign**

Famous people have been successfully used in social marketing campaigns for decades, from the movie stars used to sell war bonds in the 1940s to the California Milk Processor Board's *Got Milk* campaign of the early 1990s where celebrities sported milk "moustaches."

In terms of active transportation, former Talking Heads lead singer David Byrne has been in the spotlight for several years. He has ridden his bike as his main form of transportation since the 1980s, has designed bicycle racks for New York City and recently published *Bicycle Diaries*, a chronicle of his observations and insights into cycling.

If nothing else, then, celebrities invite attention and that attention can raise awareness of certain issues.

So when a Swedish city decided to use celebrities to promote cycling, the campaign certainly turned some heads.

For more than 40 years, the City of Malmö has been committed to creating a bicycle-friendly environment. In 2003, the city had about 350 kilometres of bike paths and lanes and about 27% of all commuter travel was made by bicycle. Even with such high numbers of cyclists (compared to most North American cities), the city wanted to encourage even more people to try cycling.

In 2003, the city began developing an advertising campaign to promote the benefits of cycling. Its flagship publication was a book that featured the cycling stories of Swedish celebrities. This was the first time the city had ever asked famous people to participate as role models for the benefits of cycling.

The book, *Famous People Who Cycle in Malmö* (cover pictured below), featured stories, essays, comic strips, biking memories, recipes and cycling secrets from 53 local and internationally known celebrities including a rock star, a comedian, athletes and writers. It was distributed free to about 48,000 households.



The book was launched in April 2005 at a cycling event attended by some of these celebrities as well as local politicians. The event included the inauguration of a special digital display

(pictured at left) that shows the number of cyclists passing it each day (more than one million cyclists have so far been counted); a fashion show of cycling clothing and accessories, including new helmet designs; a “Guess whose bike” competition where the faces of 10 celebrities and their bicycles were photographed and residents matched the right face with the right bike; and a bike “sing along” with local musicians and artists.

In a post-event telephone survey of 300 households, more than 90% reported that they had noticed the book, 53% had read it, and 30% were aware of the cycling event. One year after the launch, a second survey found that 6% of those who received the book said that it contributed to their cycling more often.

By 2009, the city had added more cycling lanes (now at about 410 kilometres) and about 40% of its 280,000 residents cycles daily to work or to school.

Max Hansson, the project manager, said that the book and cycling event were well received by local citizens,

bicycle user groups and politicians. “Making the book was an extremely positive experience,” he says. “We had a great response when we contacted the celebrities who eventually participated in the book.”

He also says that the project could be easily replicable in other jurisdictions. “The form of the book can be adapted to suit a variety of budgets and distribution methods,” he says and suggests that interviews with celebrities who cycle could be published in monthly newsletters, local papers or cycling guides.

### Community leaders get Seattle residents moving

Seattle’s *In Motion* campaign used prompts and direct outreach to engage residents in learning about and trying new travel options.

In 2003, King County Metro (KCM) began using an individualized marketing approach to increase the number of people using sustainable modes of transportation. As part of the program, KCM asked local community leaders to become part of a transportation action team.

To select their target neighborhoods, KCM first reviewed various data (demographics, transit availability and ridership, land use, etc.) and collected information on people’s perceptions, barriers and motivators to using more sustainable modes. For this portion, KCM interviewed community and business leaders and conducted discussion groups with community leaders and residents.

Once the target neighbourhoods were chosen, prompts were posted on telephone polls throughout the area. The posters—an example is pictured below—were meant to be

playful by including action phrases loosely based on the Simon & Garfunkel song *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover* (e.g., *Ride Your Bike, Mike; Hop on the Bus, Russ*, etc.). A variety of other methods such as direct mailings, yard signs and pledges were also used.



KCM then enlisted the help of local residents to become travel ambassadors for their neighbourhoods.

These ambassadors were paid a small stipend to maintain the posters, fill brochure racks at local businesses, deliver yard signs and fulfill information requests. The

ambassadors also helped organize an *In Motion* presence at community events such as the local farmers' markets and community festivals and parades.

Program managers used a telephone survey, weekly trip logs filled out by participants and bus stop counts in the targeted neighbourhoods to gauge the results. Participation levels ranged between 6% and 10% for each targeted neighbourhood where individuals reported about a 20% decrease in single occupancy vehicle trips, and an 11% increase in bus boardings nine months after the program began.

*Due to the encouragement of this program, I decided to buy a bike and do the bulk of my commuting that way.*

*My personal pledge was to make it three weeks without needing to put gas in the car - and I made it!*

*—Quotes from Seattle residents who participate in the In Motion program*

*In Motion* has now expanded to 20 neighborhoods and has reached more than 80,000 people. Since its inception, KCM estimates that more than 66,000 gallons of gas has been saved, which translates into about 674 fewer tons of carbon dioxide.

KCM also offers a free, downloadable toolkit for residents who want to become travel ambassadors and encourage sustainable transportation in their neighbourhood.

### **Student-to-student travel ambassadors**

*off-ramp* is a student-led initiative in British Columbia that encourages secondary school students to walk, cycle or take transit to school more often.

Students interested in becoming ambassadors for active transportation are provided with training and support to develop strategies and activities to encourage their peers to use sustainable transportation to get to school. The program works with schools to establish clubs of five to seven students and one lead teacher. The clubs then organize events that are not only fun for the students, like cycling demonstrations and fashion shows, but also help them overcome some of the barriers to cycling, such as bicycle repair and maintenance workshops and bicycle training.



*Pictured at left: A bicycle gear fashion show at Terry Fox Secondary School in Port Coquitlam, BC.*

“We want to teach students that riding your bike is fun and environmentally friendly,” says program coordinator, Arthur Orsini. “If only a few students are riding their bikes, other kids won’t bother.”

*Since Off-Ramp became active, the number of people driving to school decreased by almost 70%, and staff and students work hard together to maintain this.*

*—JC, student leader, Windermere Secondary School, Vancouver*

The pilot project originally began in 1999 in several Vancouver and Victoria high schools. Since then, more than 12,000 students and teachers have become involved and the program has documented increases of up to 20% more walking and cycling trips to school. Furthermore, the off-ramp model has been expanded to offer youth leader and adult facilitator training across North America.

## **Lessons Learned / Advice**

When developing a program that uses travel ambassadors, there are some general rules of thumb to consider, such as issues of trust, using the right messenger, and how the message should be delivered.

The people interviewed for this paper also had advice on how to make the best use of travel ambassadors in a sustainable transportation program.

### **Trust is key**

We all trust different types of people for different types of information. You wouldn’t call a plumber for nutritional information, but you might seek the advice of your doctor, or ask family members or friends for suggestions.

Trust, therefore, is a key issue when identifying the right kind of travel ambassador to use in a sustainable transportation program.

People often identify better with others who share similar beliefs, experiences, habits, geography or culture, and, as such trust their opinions. But studies show that people also put their trust in experts in a specific field.

How does one measure trust levels? The 2010 Edelman Trust Barometer, a yearly survey of established institutions, is a useful tool in this regard. The survey (conducted in 22 countries with 5,000 respondents) provides insights into which institutions and types of experts are the most trusted. Although the survey is aimed primarily at people’s view of the corporate sector, it also studies people’s attitudes to different segments of society, including governments and non-government organizations (NGOs).

Over a 10-year period, the Trust Barometer respondents have consistently ranked NGOs as the most trusted institution, followed by the energy, health care and

technology sectors. A “person like me” (someone with whom the respondent personally identifies) also remains high on the list of trusted sources.

Richard Edelman, President and CEO, said that the 2010 survey, however, found a slight attitudinal change.

“In this volatile [economic] year an informed public values guidance from credentialed experts over a ‘person like me,’” he says. “They’re looking for academics, doctors, NGO heads...people who have objectivity and expertise.”

Edelman’s general conclusion is that, although trust levels change depending on economic or other factors, overall we trust people like us the most, while recognizing the need for experts depending on the situation.

### **The right messenger for the right audience**

Finding the right person to deliver your sustainable transportation messages is a key consideration in any program.

In the case of two programs mentioned in this paper, community leaders (*In Motion*) and students (*Off Ramp*) were used to encourage and promote active and sustainable transportation. The travel ambassadors in these cases were “people like me,” persons trusted by the target audience and with whom they could easily identify.

In other programs mentioned in this paper, the involvement of doctors—the experts—was key to program success.

Tricia Zakaria of Clean Air Achievers believes that the right messenger makes all the difference.

“You can tell anyone to go to a website, but the big factor is motivation. People need a role model to communicate the message and inspire them. Athletes are the perfect ambassadors because they are well-respected and have experience dealing with the public and tend to be more natural and comfortable with people,” she says. “Our athletes bring their experiences and tie them to the audience’s experiences. They are also well-positioned to see the problems of poor air or water quality because they’re out in the environment all the time.”

### **Telling the story**

Terri Nopp, Deputy General Manager and Senior Vice President of Edelman Portland, says that storytelling is one of the most influential forms of communication. In her article *Storytelling for Success*, Nopp writes that, “The London School of Business found that people retain 65%-70% of information shared via a story, versus only 5%-10% of information conveyed through statistics.”

Travel ambassadors who tell their own stories—how they personally overcame barriers or benefited from the

use of sustainable transportation—can be a persuasive way to engage people to adopt different travel behaviours.

John Hastings, for example, uses his experiences as both an athlete and as asthmatic to get his message across.

“As an asthmatic athlete who competes outdoors, I am directly affected by smog and other air pollutants. I competed in China at last years Olympic test events and saw a dramatic decrease in my performance because of the air quality,” he says “I want to ensure that I, or anyone for that matter, never experience such conditions in Canada or around the world.”

He also says that he delves into his past to provide a role model for the students. “I do presentations at leadership camps and I tell the kids that when I turned 16 and got my license I was driving everyday. I didn’t think twice about the impact. Little did I know!” he says. “When I start telling kids about the costs involved, that inspires them to action.”

For Valérie Hould-Marchant, she says that simply using the mystique of the Olympics is often enough to gain student attention.

“The Olympics has a special place in my heart. It’s the only event in the world that can stop wars and bring people together,” she says. “That’s a message I can pass on to kids, that the world can come together for the greater good.”

She also notes that ambassadors should be prepared to adapt their message to the audience and make things visual for the audience.

“I keep my presentations short for younger kids and I use my Olympic medal as a tool to pass around and show the kids what’s possible. An Olympic medal is like the Stanley Cup—people love to touch it!” she says. “Passion is crucial because you never know what might inspire someone.”

### **Getting doctors involved**

Dr. Chris Milburn of Sydney, Nova Scotia says getting doctors interested in an active transportation program can be challenging.

“Doctors are so focused on seeing patients, so program managers need to keep their messages brief—no five-page letters!” he says. “Doctors are really busy so don’t put any more hurdles in their way.”

The *Move for Health and the Environment* project in Switzerland concluded that recruiting doctors to get involved does take time, but that doctors are best recruited when contacted by their peers.

Lee Parker of NHS Sutton says that initially, doctors were unsure about the value of the *Active Steps* project.

“There were concerns that the initiative would be short lived and competed with other existing health initiatives,” says Parker. “However, appointing a local doctor to chair the project board ensured that doctors’ interests were represented at all key decision stages and provided valuable insight into the thoughts and concerns of local GPs.”

Once doctors are involved, program managers need to make it simple for them to stay involved. Dr. Kevin Saunders of Winnipeg suggests that resources such as ‘exercise prescriptions’ posters or pamphlets are an easy resource for doctors to use. “Doctors aren’t exercise experts and they need resources to make it easy for them to give their patients the right advice.”

Saunders also says that program managers should try to choose doctors that set a good example.

“I’m 50 and I have core beliefs about life-long active living. To me, activity is essential to health,” he says. “There are so many people around who notice what you do and how you do it so if you preach it but don’t do it, you’re a hypocrite and you lose credibility. If you’re out there trying, people take notice and it’s personally motivating for other people.”

Dr. Jane Brooks says that when it comes to approaching doctors to become travel ambassadors, one of the best ways is through the local medical association. “Most associations are willing to lend staff support to help get the message to doctors,” she says. “There are great things going on in communities and if you can get a medical association behind the message, it becomes much more powerful.”

### **Training your travel ambassadors**

Even if the travel ambassadors you choose are natural-born speakers, that doesn’t mean they can’t benefit from specific training.

The Clean Air Achievers program provides a manual to each of the athletes involved in the program. The manual includes presentations, facts about climate change and pollution, classroom management and speaking tips. CAC staff also work one-on-one with each athlete before they make their first presentation to fine-tune the message.

“You need to give your ambassadors the support they need to make a good presentation and to make sure that they are aware of what barriers there may be to using active transportation so that they can be prepared with solutions,” says Zakaria.

John Hastings says that the CAC training was very straightforward and helpful.

“They had a plan and had already developed a PowerPoint presentation that I could use. They gave me

speaking tips and pointers and some sample questions that we might get from the kids,” he says. “CAC gave us all the science behind pollution and that’s an integral part because I had some knowledge, but not enough. It sparked me to do more research so that I could answer more questions. It all helps me keep my mind on the big picture.”

### **Conclusion**

Getting people to change their travel habits is never easy. It rarely happens overnight and people often fall back into bad habits without encouragement and inspiration.

Changing behaviour in even one person, let alone an entire community, requires an understanding of that person’s attitudes, values and perceived norms, and what stage the person is at in terms of the behaviour you want to influence. Internal and external barriers, such as a lack of motivation or insufficient transportation infrastructure must also be reviewed if behaviour change is to be achieved over the long-term.

That’s where a travel ambassador can help. They not only inspire individuals to change their behaviour but can also influence those decision makers who are directly involved in implementing sustainable transportation infrastructure.

It doesn’t matter whether they’re a well-known community activist, a co-worker or student peer, a doctor or a celebrated athlete, all travel ambassadors play a role in inspiring others to use active and sustainable transportation for their health, their wallet and their environment.

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