LET'S CARPOOL
Weaving a national web of commuter carpoolers

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ABSTRACT

Low vehicle occupancy rates are a key cause of congestion and while large infrastructure projects can improve traffic flows, they fall short of optimising the 3.5 empty seats the average commuter vehicle carries. More regions around New Zealand are now exploring commuter carpool schemes as a less expensive alternative to building infrastructure, to relieve congestion by reducing the number of vehicles on the road.

This paper describes the coordinated effort by local government around New Zealand to raise the profile of carpooling. Through a cost-effective partnership, Auckland Transport and Greater Wellington Regional Council combined their respective carpooling programmes to create a single national carpooling scheme. Through this innovative partnership, a national brand and database for carpooling was created: 'Let's Carpool'.

The national 'Let's Carpool' website was launched in June 2012 and is available to all regions and local governments around New Zealand. It provides a free, secure service to help individuals find a carpool match for their regular commute, one-off trips and inter-regional trips. This collaborative approach has realised financial benefits for all seven regional partners and has placed Let's Carpool as the New Zealand leader for commuter carpooling.

INTRODUCTION

Carpooling has been around for decades but has recently re-emerged in New Zealand with the support of sophisticated matching software to become a cost-efficient tool to reduce traffic congestion in urban areas.

On New Zealand roads, traffic congestion occurs almost solely during peak hours when commuters travel to and from work. Congestion in Auckland is currently estimated to cost $1.25 billion annually compared to free flow conditions (Wallis & Lupton, 2013). At most other times of the day, adequate capacity exists (Hyder, 2009). Even during peak hours, traffic volumes can be only slightly above a road's capacity, indicating that a small shift in commuter vehicle numbers could significantly improve journey times (Hyder, 2009).

Low vehicle occupancy rates contribute to peak hour congestion. Improving the efficiency of existing infrastructure, by increasing vehicle occupancy rates in the case of carpooling, has shown to have strong economic benefits (Hulten, 1996.). At an individual level, carpooling is also becoming an attractive transport solution. Saving money is the main motivator for people to join a carpool in New Zealand (Abrahamse, W & Keall, M., 2012).

With traffic jams at peak hours affecting productivity, an abundance of spare seats available in commuter vehicles and a desire for individuals to save on their transport costs, the potential for carpooling is significant.

BENEFITS OF A NATIONAL COMMUTER CARPOOL WEBSITE

The success of carpooling websites depends heavily on their ability to attract a critical mass of registrants, a point which differs depending on geographic spread. For a small country like New Zealand, multiple carpooling sites make creating this critical mass difficult.

The growing trend across local government in New Zealand to establish local carpooling websites demonstrated there was sufficient demand to address the issue in a coordinated way. It also meant there was potential to reduce costs nationwide and improve public awareness.

Since 2009, the Let's Carpool brand and website had proven to be effective in facilitating carpooling in the Wellington region and had attracted significant media attention.

In 2012, Auckland Transport and Greater Wellington Regional Council joined forces to develop, operate and promote a national brand for carpooling. The existing regional carpooling databases were combined into a single national database with a single national software licence agreement. One website for Let's Carpool was created and a national software license fee was negotiated that could be extended to all regions that chose to join the scheme and administer the website locally.

Let's Carpool is powered by Trapeze Ridepro software, which can manage an unlimited number of commuter registrations with detailed profiles, multiple addresses, and commuter specific search criteria.

The resulting national site - www.letscarpool.govt.nz – was launched in June 2012 with six regions participating: Auckland, Wellington, Taranaki, Manawatu/Wanganui, Waikato and Nelson. Bay of Plenty joined the scheme as the seventh region in September 2012. By joining forces with other regions, Let's Carpool became established as the leader in commuter carpooling in New Zealand.

Let's Carpool is open to both public registrations, and workplace schemes at no cost. It provides a common platform for companies with multiple New Zealand locations. All marketing material is made freely available to participating regions through online file sharing, and templates for promotional material were developed by Auckland Transport to generate cost and time savings for other regions.

Other key benefits of the national commuter carpooling website include:

- Significant cost-savings for all parties by re-negotiating each region's separate software license into one combined national license
- Major reduction in effort and cost for new regions looking to promote carpooling
- Creation of a strong, well-recognised national brand for commuter carpooling
- Legitimisation of the carpooling website through wide local government support
- Collaboration on branding and marketing for further cost-efficiencies
- Less confusion for users over competing carpooling websites
- Use of the service for commuting across regional boundaries
- Users not needing to re-register if they move cities within New Zealand

CURRENT TRENDS

Around 7,300 people in New Zealand have registered on Let's Carpool, with 6,650 of these active users on the website. Of this number, around a third of people were previously driving alone. As would be expected, Auckland and Wellington centres have the largest number of registrants.

Figure 1 shows the daily level of web interest following the launch of the national website. During this time Let's Carpool had 9,542 unique page views. Each of the spikes in the above graph represent a Monday, indicating that Monday morning is a popular day for people to visit the site to investigate potential matches.

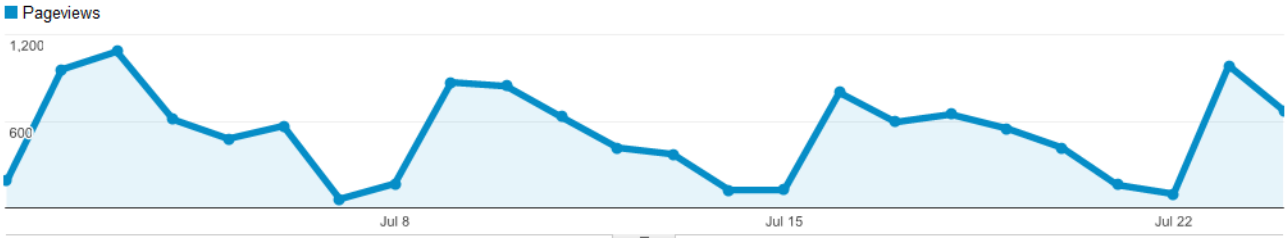

Figure 1. Web hits for the period of 1 July- 24 July www.letscarpool.govt.nz

Evaluation surveys from Let's Carpool registrants in the Wellington region indicate that the service is successful in increasing the uptake of carpooling and decreasing the number of people commuting alone (Abrahamse & Keall, 2012; Greater Wellington Regional Council, 2012).

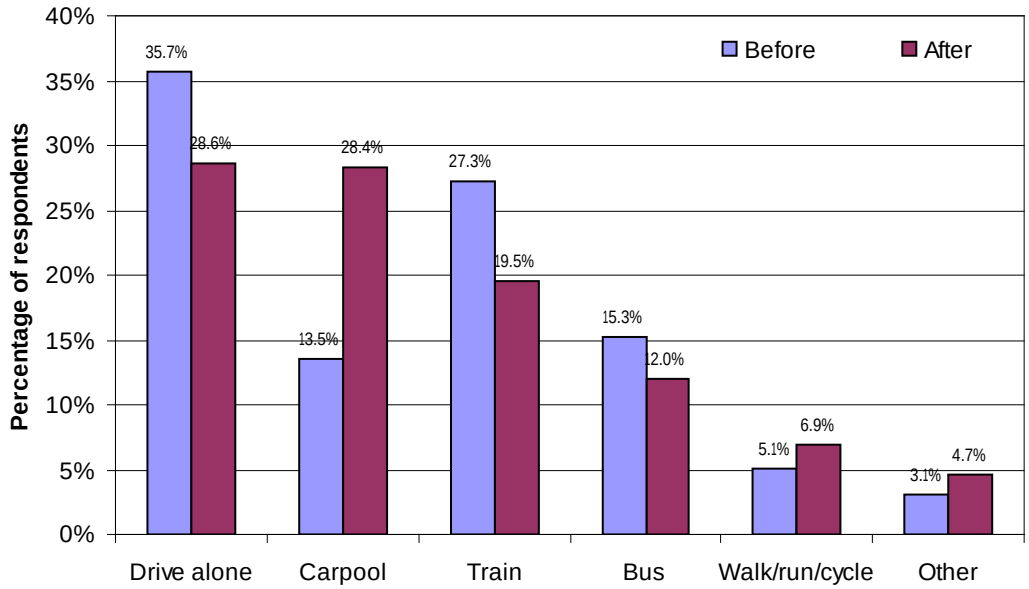

Figure 2. Main mode of travel to work before and after registering with Let's Carpool from an evaluation of the Wellington scheme in 2012.

Carpooling can attract some people off public transport, especially where services are infrequent or unreliable, so marketing efforts need to be targeted at drivers and away from public transport users where possible. Train upgrades were disrupting services in the Wellington region at the time of the Let's Carpool evaluation and this is thought to account for the drop in train use seen in Figure 2.

In Auckland, carpooling was previously focused on business promotion so the introduction of a national single brand is a significant step to increasing uptake not only by businesses but individual commuters. Surveys identified access to carpool matches as being a barrier to uptake with 75% of those open to carpooling unaware that they could use an online matching service. In Auckland, the Let's Carpool website was launched with an advertising campaign and widespread promotion of the national scheme. This received positive media response with coverage including TV3. Campaign results highlighted the strong positive support for carpooling with 60% of existing carpoolers (who carpool regularly or sometimes) seeking to continue with carpooling into the future and over 1,300 new registrations.

CONCLUSION

The future focus of Let's Carpool is to continue promoting the website across the country, supporting Councils and regions to offer carpooling as a viable transport alternative. The national partnership is continuing through support for technical advice and improvements and through combining marketing resources. The partnership is currently working on a national campaign to promote carpooling for May.

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