

Remaining “Service-Focused” in Tough Economic Times

BY JOE SCIULLI

The phone rings: “How much more can you give me from the parking program?” comes the voice from the other end. “Nothing, Mr. Mayor,” says the parking director. Five minutes later, it rings again. “How much more can you give me from the parking program?” asks the mayor of the new parking director!

IN THE CURRENT ECONOMY, WITH pressures mounting to raise public revenue and cut services, the municipal on-street parking program is fair game – and hunting season has been declared!

Meanwhile, there is the city’s parking director – supposedly the advocate for parking equity, availability and customer service. He or she may have some tough decisions to make, especially when the phone rings and it’s the mayor calling. “Justify” meter-rate and ticket-fine increases? Cut staff? Reduce or defray planned maintenance?

To be sure, a parking program is always in the cross-hairs, and some city officials might see only the dollars and cents – rather than the parking management sense – of asking for more revenue from increased fines, meter rates, “more tickets” or staffing cuts.

But the opinion here is that the parking leader must above all protect the program’s integrity and be proactive to resist pressure from those who might see the program only as a cash-cow to be milked dry during tough economic times, or at anytime when parking conditions on the street do not warrant pricing and policy changes.

So how can a parking leader resist the temptation to make unwarranted changes to policies or operations?

The short answer is that it requires a strong-willed leader who has paved the way with all parking stakeholders through education and action; one who can make the most persuasive argument from a position of facts as to whether changes in parking prices, policies, operations and budgets are warranted.

As to the longer answer, here are eight proven approaches, from what literally could be hundreds, to help the parking leader make wise decisions in tough economic times.

1. Routinely collect and analyze your on-street parking activity indicators and maintain these statistics over time.

This is step one. As a great parking director once said, “You can’t manage what you don’t measure.” Occupancy and violation rates provide feedback on the appropriateness of meter rates, regulated parking limits and enforcement activities. This knowledge creates a climate for continual improvement. The violation capture rate, as a measure of enforcement efficiency and when analyzed in concert with other indicators, can indicate how well enforcement beats are designed, patrolled and supervised.

2. Compare your program’s indicators with its own history (if available), and with selected norms for on-street parking activity indicators. Developing these benchmarks lays the



foundation for internal management improvements; also, having trend data may help you win approval for programmatic changes that may be needed in the future. These norms can be found in Chapter 4: Parking Surveys and Studies in the IPI publication “Parking 101: A Parking Primer.” Suggested norms also have been provided in the Parking Industry Exhibition’s On-Street Boot Camp sessions (materials available through **Parking Today** or by contacting the author). If your program’s indicators are generally within these norms, chances are your program is working toward its potential. If not, an offering of potential causes and remedies are indicated in the norms matrix.

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3. Remember that having a history of improvements or degradations in parking indicators is the best justification for pricing, policy and other management decisions. So you want to raise the meter rate because the city has a budget shortfall? Bad manager! But if your data trends show that parking availability and turnover have suffered as off-street prices have increased while meter rates and ticket fines have stagnated, your odds of success and acceptance of the remedies will be much improved.

4. Never confuse the enforcement officer’s daily productivity average as a measure of program efficiency or effectiveness. Historically, some programs have achieved averages of 100 tickets per officer per day, but their parking and traffic situations were none the better for it. Collectively, the percent of optimum turnover rate, and the safety violation and parking occupancy rates, are more representative of how well the parking program is fulfilling its mission.

5. Maintain regular contact with your constituencies. Make sure program managers, supervisors, analysts and you (as the leader) participate in merchant and neighborhood association meetings; meet with advocacy groups for persons with disabilities; and maintain contacts with elected officials and peers. Listen to their feedback and address their needs as appropriate. When it comes to the public contacts, don’t be discouraged by initial attempts that may degenerate into grievance sessions. It may take repeated efforts to gain acceptance and trust that could translate to support during the tough times.

6. Fight to maintain funding for parking analyst positions. These positions can generate their salaries many

times over in cost savings and optimized revenues. More important, the contribution to program quality from them can’t be overestimated. For the relatively smaller parking programs, at

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least one individual who is focused solely on collecting, tracking and providing quantitative feedback to supervisors and managers on parking activity indicators is essential to program quality, efficiency and effectiveness. Large-city programs may require several analysts per operating branch. Their functional and geographical assignments and performance expectations should be clearly defined to realize the most value from their efforts and optimize program efficiency.

7. Emphasize and promote the qualitative aspects of the parking management program to external and internal stakeholders alike. Does your parking program distribute an annual report to elected officials, other municipal managers, and the constituencies mentioned above? If so, does it highlight the program’s positive effects on transit timeliness, public safety, and parking access improvements in commercial and residential areas? And is this report circulated to your most important constituents – your employees? And what of the report’s underlying message? Does it focus solely on tickets issued and revenues collected? Not that these indicators

aren’t important measures of program efficiency, but parking revenue must be viewed for what it really is: a by-product, not the objective, of a parking management program.

8. Invest the time and money in employee customer service, communication, leadership and refresher technical training. Yes, you’ll have to take your enforcement officers and others “off the street” for awhile. Your ticket count will be less on those days –

accept it as a down-payment on future improvements in product quality and customer service. But your frontline employees make or break the public’s image of your parking program. To the extent that enforcement officers and others believe their only purpose is to “make money” for the mayor, the temptation for some to abuse their jobs and the public may be hard to resist over time.

Obviously, the above items are just starting points to help your parking program avoid unwise, knee-jerk decisions in this unsettled economy. We haven’t even discussed meter security, operational efficiency, and ticket processing and collection strategies that also should be pursued.

But in the end, knowing your parking program’s numbers and maintaining contact with its stakeholders are two of the best ways of ensuring its mission remains service-focused, as opposed to revenue-driven.

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