

Case Study



School Bus Operator Drives Competitive Advantage with BlackBerry

Company: Southland Transportation Ltd. is a privately owned transportation company providing school bus and other transportation services. Southland has close to 900 vehicles and 1000 employees dispersed among eight Alberta offices.

Industry: Transportation

Region: Americas

Company Size: Large Enterprise

Email Platform: Microsoft Exchange

BlackBerry solution: The Dynamic Bus Schedule Program - Developed in-house with independent developer

Challenge:

Southland Transportation Ltd. wanted a solution to better services customers by communicating interruptions to bus schedule from a variety of factors – traffic, construction, driver availability, weather etc.

Solution:

Southland Transportation created a communication system that alerts parents about school bus delays in advance, so children don't have to wait out in cold weather. They deployed BlackBerry smartphones, with a custom-built application, to drivers so they can report road conditions and delays quickly and easily on-the-go, providing timely and accurate updates for parents, students and the transportation company.

Results:

- Additional Business from Existing Customers
- New Competitive Advantage
- Capacity for Business Growth
- Reduction in Call Volume at Dispatch Office
- Ability to Deliver Unparalleled Customer Service





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~ Jay Maki
Assistant General Manager, Southland

The Challenge: Managing a school bus transportation company

Managing a school bus transportation company in any city has its challenges. Traffic congestion, detours, driver availability and accidents are just a handful of factors that interrupt bus schedules. In Calgary, Alberta, school bus delays can be a health hazard for children who wait outside in winter temperatures that often drop to – 40 degrees Celsius.

Southland Transportation, a Calgary-based school bus operator, solved their challenges with a BlackBerry® smartphone-based communication system that alerts parents of school bus delays in advance, so kids can stay indoors longer.

Southland is a small, privately owned company that has been serving their primary client base of public school boards and private schools for more than 37 years. They have a reputation for community commitment and safety.

"As a school bus operator, we have an obligation to support the safety and well-being of children," says Jay Maki, Southland's Assistant General Manager. "To keep kids from waiting unnecessarily in freezing temperatures, we wanted to create a way of letting parents know about bus delays the moment they occur," he says. "This led us to begin searching for a communication solution that would allow us to know exactly what was happening on every bus route at all times."

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~ MILAN ERIC, Senior Systems Analyst, Southland

Southland's Vision : A Dynamic Bus Schedule Program

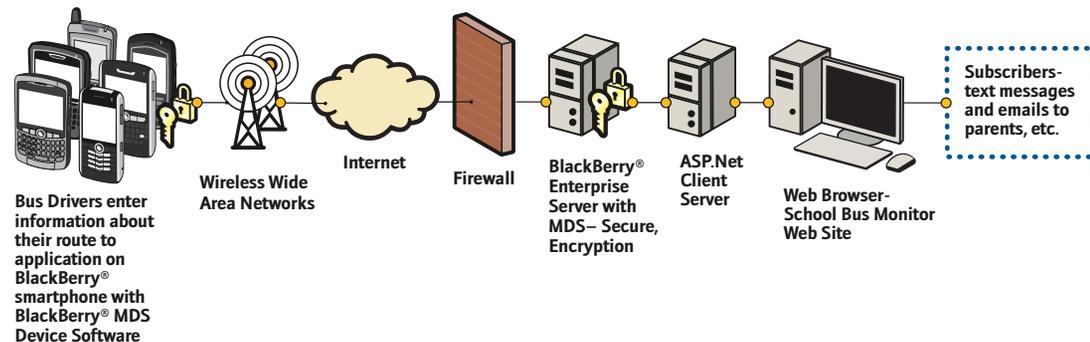
Southland explored various GPS solutions common to the transportation industry but found them only partially useful. "The GPS systems we looked at showed us where our buses were, but not what our drivers were encountering on the road," says Maki. "We wanted a solution that would allow our drivers to communicate road closures, accidents, weather and other factors that cause bus delays with our dispatch office and with other drivers."

Maki ruled out cell phone-based communications which would require drivers to type text messages or talk on the phone. What he envisioned instead was a smartphone with a custom-built application whereby drivers could report road conditions and delays quickly and with ease, by simply selecting options from a pre-defined menu.

"For our unique requirements, the BlackBerry solution quickly emerged as the perfect device," says Milan Eric, Senior Systems Analyst at Southland. "The ease with which custom applications can be built, coupled with the easy-to-use interface of the BlackBerry smartphone itself made a BlackBerry solution the obvious choice."

Maki contracted an independent programmer to develop a web application that fit Southland's vision. They called the final solution the Dynamic Bus Scheduler program.

How it Works: Southland's Dynamic Bus Schedule Program



Southland bus drivers are now equipped with BlackBerry smartphones and use the custom-built application to send reports when they encounter delays on their route.

"Navigating through the application is quick and easy for our drivers," says Maki. "For example, if a driver comes upon a road closure, he or she would safely come to a stop and launch the application icon on the BlackBerry smartphone with one click."

"Using the track wheel, the driver simply selects the stop number, reason for delay, and anticipated delay time. All inputs are selected from menus so there is no typing required," he says. The message is then instantly sent to Southland dispatch, the school, as well as all parents with children on that route.

Parents subscribe to a messaging service, part of the Dynamic Bus Schedule Program, by simply visiting a web site, entering their child's route number and indicating whether they wish to receive updates as emails or text messages on their mobile phones. The service is free for parents, and paid for by participating school boards.

Powered by the BlackBerry Mobile Data System

The Dynamic Bus Schedule Program was designed for the BlackBerry smartphones using the BlackBerry® Mobile Data System (MDS), a streamlined application development framework for the BlackBerry® Enterprise Solution.

The MDS Browser and the channel push functionality push icons out to BlackBerry smartphones that link the users to predefined websites.

The ASP.NET application accepts the connections from the specific BlackBerry device and, based on driver input through the web interface, it sends canned messages to the subscribers of the service.

For example: If the bus driver applies a 10 minute delay, the application updates the remaining stop times and sends the corresponding text or email messages to the subscribers of that route- letting them know that further stop times have been changed to the 10 minute delay.

Custom Application Creates a Competitive Advantage

"As the solution was being developed, we really got a feel for the power of the BlackBerry solution and how easy it was to make enhancements during the build," says Maki.

One such enhancement was a shortcut icon on the BlackBerry desktop screen which lets the bus driver launch the application in one click, instead of having to browse to a web site using a bookmark.

"The beauty of the BlackBerry solution is that it made it easy and affordable for us to create a customized communication solution which, in our case, has given us a competitive advantage," Maki says.

Southland also uses the BlackBerry solution for urgent communications. "If we need to locate a particular child, perhaps because he or she got on the wrong bus, we can instantly alert our drivers by sending a message to their BlackBerry smartphone," says Maki.

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Results

Additional Business from Existing Customers: Southland has added their BlackBerry smartphone solution to more than 50 bus routes among two school board customers in the Calgary area. "We're having success because we created a very practical solution for a problem that had never been properly addressed," Maki explains.

New Competitive Advantage: Southland's BlackBerry deployment helps the small company differentiate from larger school bus operators. "The BlackBerry solution and our Dynamic Bus Schedule Program are helping us deliver a compelling niche offering versus our larger competitors," says Maki.

Capacity for Business Growth: "Now that we have the product built, tested, and proven, I see the potential for new business opportunities," says Maki. "In particular, this BlackBerry solution gives us a unique offering for private school routes and special needs routes that travel longer distance and are at greater risk of experiencing delays."

Reduction in Call Volume at Dispatch Office: Sending bus delay messages in advance to parents and schools has reduced the number of incoming phone inquiries pertaining to delays. With the Dynamic Bus Schedule Program and BlackBerry smartphones in place, Southland is positioned to enjoy incremental savings with every new school board that adopts the system.

Ability to Deliver Unparalleled Customer Service: "The most important outcome of the BlackBerry solution is peace of mind for parents in our communities," says Maki. "Child safety is paramount for our customers and for us, and we're proud that this new solution is enhancing the safety and well-being of children in our bitterly cold winter climate."

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For more information on BlackBerry solutions, visit www.blackberry.com/go/success

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