

# Be Car Conscious Summary Report UPWP 2015



## **Introduction**

In July of 2014 CarShare Vermont received a FY 15 UPWP grant to develop a cost awareness campaign to help Vermonters better understand the true cost to own and drive their cars. The result was Be Car Conscious ([carconscious.org](http://carconscious.org)), a fun and interactive outreach campaign paired with an easy-to-use, customizable online calculator that allows people to plug in their car costs and see their full out-of-pocket expenses.

Below is an overview of our work, including the research and design phase, our strategy for outreach and implementation, as well as the final results and lessons learned.

## **Program Overview**

Since CarShare Vermont's launch in 2008, we've had countless conversations with Vermonters about the cost to own versus the cost to share vehicles. When you look at the numbers and data, it is clear that vehicle ownership is expensive. However, many people do not fully understand all of the ownership costs, and the differentiation becomes less apparent. Further, it has made people question CarShare Vermont's relatively low driving rates because they were not using an accurate comparison to ownership costs.

For example, when we would ask people how much their vehicle(s) cost, typically gas and insurance immediately came to mind. The most expensive costs, mainly depreciation and on-going maintenance, were often excluded. These bigger costs are in large part "out of sight and out of mind;" that is until a person decides to sell their car or they face a major repair. This makes these intangible costs easy to ignore and difficult for many people to wrap their heads around from a day-to-day budgeting perspective.

Our goal with Be Car Conscious was to shed some light on these important concepts and calculations, and shift people's thinking—and ultimately their behavior. Our hunch was that a broader realization about the true cost to own and drive would help more people make informed decisions about how to spend their hard earned money, and ideally help them see the benefits of choosing less expensive and more sustainable modes (i.e. walking, biking, taking bus, and sharing).

## **Research & Design**

The first phase of research allowed us to get a better handle on what resources currently existed to help people understand their car costs. After extensive online searching, we discovered that a customizable vehicle cost calculator was not available. AAA's annual Your Cost of Driving worksheet probably came closest, but it was not interactive and it relied on national data—this made the results less convincing to some people. This solidified our desire to craft our own tool using

average Vermont car cost data (as needed) to make it more relevant, engaging, and credible for local residents.

The second phase of research allowed us to dive more deeply into what local residents perceived their vehicle spending to be, and more importantly, what they factored into their out-of-pocket calculations.

We conducted two targeted focus groups with non-CSVT members who were considering changing the number of vehicles they owned and likely weighing cost as a factor in their decision-making. The first focus group was with two-car households considering whether or not to get rid of a car, and the second was with one-car household considering whether or not to buy a second car. In addition, we also hosted a focus group with existing CarShare Vermont members who had shed a vehicle before joining CarShare Vermont.

To recruit non-member households we advertised citywide on Front Porch Forum in Burlington and Winooski. Over 50 people quickly responded(!) to our invitation to participate in our research, which was a huge, albeit very pleasant, surprise. It signaled that we were on the right track with our campaign; it also confirmed that there were a large number of people in our community that had the desire to learn more about their car costs but did not necessarily have the the tools to do so.

Because we only had space for 20 people to participate in the focus groups we developed an online survey to capture additional feedback. What we heard was loud and clear: participants wanted an easy to use calculator that would allow them to accurately calculate their car costs and help them make more informed decisions. The calculator results would help them decide whether it was time to shed a car altogether, buy a new one, or repair/replace an existing one. They also wanted to see, mainly from a cost standpoint, what it might mean if they decided to start carsharing and using other modes. Because we know that car ownership is the number one factor that contributes to VMT (people who own vehicles are more likely to drive them out of habit and convenience rather than necessity), any information that encourages people to question their need to own a car, or pushes them to consider delaying a purchase, is critical in motivating them to adopt a more multi-modal, car-light lifestyle.

In addition to understanding the perceived out-of-pocket expenses of vehicle ownership, our research also sought to learn more about opportunity costs. Specifically, we asked participants what they would rather be spending their money on. The responses varied from very practical needs such as student loans to fun family vacations. These insights helped inform our campaign messaging later on.

Once we had a good sense of what specific type of tool would be useful, we worked with our design team and web developer to create a simple website

(carconscious.org), build the actual calculator tool, and develop the outreach and marketing materials that would be used to promote it.

Developing the tool was easier said than done! We did our best to keep it simple and easy to use, but also comprehensive enough to give people some eye-opening and motivating results. We researched local and national costs for insurance, repairs, and maintenance, for example, so that people could choose to input their actual costs or select reliable auto-fill options. We also crunched CarShare Vermont's extensive usage data to determine average costs for a light, medium, heavy, and ultra CarShare Vermont user so that we could offer a very realistic comparison to carsharing. We wanted to highlight depreciation in particular because it is a significant cost that *none* of our focus group participants considered in their calculations. To this end, we spent a good amount of time educating ourselves about this somewhat elusive concept so that we could effectively illustrate it for others in a simple, digestible way.

We intentionally kept the overall look and feel of Be Car Conscious very light, friendly, and non-judgmental so people would feel positive about engaging with us and using the tool. And, we focused on using interesting car cost statistics in all of our marketing materials so that even if someone did not take the step to use the calculator, they we're still learning something about the hidden costs of car ownership.

### **Community Outreach, Implementation & Feedback**

Between April and December of 2015, we employed a number of creative outreach strategies to promote Be Car Conscious widely throughout Chittenden County. This included: paid a

- Advertising with CCTA, Seven Days, Front Porch Forum, the Roxxy Theater, and VPR;
- Regular tabling at the Burlington Farmer's Market, City Market, Church Street, and at several events (e.g. Main Street Landing movie nights throughout December)
- Extensive social media posts;
- Several newsletter articles;
- A prominent 10' by 10' window display in CarShare Vermont's storefront office on St. Paul St.; and
- Tailored partner outreach.

The response to the campaign was overwhelmingly positive. People were eager to engage with the materials and expressed appreciation to have a free calculator available to help them become more aware or validate what they already knew about their driving costs.

The campaign also appealed to car owners and non-car owners alike. People who were car-free felt good about their wise financial decision, while car owners had the opportunity to decide whether they were comfortable with their spending—and if not, look for ways to cut costs. We also received good feedback that the results felt very accurate and not inflated (unlike AAA's numbers). People also liked the option to look at how their results compared to the national stats, and to CarShare Vermont.

Over 600 submissions have come in to date and the number continues to rise. When we asked users if they were surprised by what they learned, here are some of the responses we received:

"Yes! Ugh! Thank you so much for this calculator. I'm currently making lifestyle changes to reduce my reliance on my car and this is just the kind of eye-opener I need to spur me on!"

"Yes. I was way off."

"Seems about right for our second car... Glad we decided to trade it for a couple e-bikes instead!"

"The rate of depreciation surprised me more than the cost! So much faster than I thought..."

"My guess was very close. I would LOVE a practical way to cut my costs."

It was heartening to hear that people found value in the tool and that it helped motivate them to think about new ways to change their travel behavior. We were also very encouraged by the data that resulted from this effort, which undeniably confirmed our strong assertions that carsharing is a much more affordable option for many people. Specifically, results from the calculator revealed that for people who drive less than 10,000 miles annually, they could cut their per mile driving expenses almost in half by using CarShare Vermont instead (including our membership fees). For those driving fewer than 7,500 miles, the savings exceed 60%!

Once we had substantial data to demonstrate the savings that CarShare Vermont can offer over vehicle ownership for those who drive fewer than 10,000 miles per year and do not need to own a car (e.g. to commute to a work location not serviced by transit), we developed new messaging and materials to further augment our campaign. This strategy was highly effective. For example, when we shared this data in the form of a Seven Days online ad, it received a record number of clicks to our Be Car Conscious website and we saw an uptick in people using the calculator.

## **Lessons Learned & Next Steps**

Overall Be Car Conscious was a hugely successful campaign, and we're excited to continue to promote the calculator as part of our ongoing outreach strategy. In the future, we might consider adding an option to calculate multiple vehicles at once. This would make the tool more comprehensive, and allow multiple vehicle households to see the full impact of car ownership on their monthly/annual budgets. We were also asked to consider including a leased vehicle option so that folks could compare the cost to lease verses own.

An added bonus of this project is the ability to capture all calculator submissions and have real Vermont numbers to analyze on an on-going basis. This gives us even more information about local car costs, as well as community cost perception verses reality. We will continue to analyze results from our calculator and use the information to talk with people about the benefits of carsharing (and other modes) and the cost savings that are possible when car ownership is no longer the default assumption.