

IPI's *Parking Matters*[®] Program Turns 5

As it celebrates its early success in changing attitudes within and outside the parking industry, the program is still working its magic

Anyone who has been in the parking industry for more than five years has witnessed some profound changes, but perhaps none more remarkable than the way it is regarded by others. As the International Parking Institute's (IPI's) 2015 *Emerging Trends in Parking* survey recently confirmed, nearly half of the parking professionals polled feel that these past five years have seen an improvement in others' perceptions of the industry.

It certainly is no wonder, given that some of the world's most powerful media outlets, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Guardian*, and CNN, and highly influential trade media are now conveying overwhelmingly positive messages about parking. When an NPR reporter says, "The parking industry tries to make your life easier by helping drivers get in and out of spaces as conveniently as possible," anyone who's been around for more than a few years knows that the industry wasn't always viewed that way.

At least some of the credit for this extraordinary turnaround goes to *Parking Matters*[®], IPI's industry-wide public relations and marketing program to improve industry perceptions, which is celebrating its fifth anniversary this year.

By the late 2000s, the industry had long been struggling with an undeserved image problem. "When I was first being interviewed for a position with IPI, I was astonished at how complex and important parking was, yet the people working in the field got no credit for the enormous responsibility they shoulder and the expertise they need to be successful," says IPI Executive Director Shawn Conrad, CAE, who

came on board in 2008. "There was a major disconnect between the incredible work being done and the negative views people had of the industry. We hadn't yet found a cohesive and comprehensive way to convey the expertise and all the many positive changes taking place."

Conrad encouraged IPI's Board members to take a leap of faith and tackle its image head-on with a multi-faceted public relations program. He tapped colleague Helen Sullivan, who developed similar successful programs for other industries, to share her experiences with IPI's Board members and lay the groundwork for a positive parking program. "We had an enormous hill to climb," says Conrad, "but I was confident we would be able to make inroads in changing people's impressions."

Parking Matters began with a document Sullivan likes to call the "Manifesto," outlining a number of ambitious, long-term PR goals: to educate and increase awareness about the value of parking professionals among influential target audiences who could most benefit the industry, to generate positive media messages to change public perceptions, and to help those in the industry appreciate the value of their profession and attract people to the field.



"It is so rewarding to see just how much already has come to fruition," says Sullivan, who has directed the program since its official adoption in 2010. "I'll be the first one to acknowledge we have a long way to go, but we have accomplished a great deal of what we wanted in this first phase plus a few things we thought were pretty 'blue sky' at the time. It just shows that when an industry decides to harness the power of PR, great things can happen."

Building Respect Starts from Within

One of the core elements of the *Parking Matters* program is to give parking professionals better tools to appreciate—and communicate—how important their own careers are. "This isn't about making parking professionals look good. They are good; in fact, they're fantastic," says Sullivan. "My job's easy. I don't have to make things up or gloss things over—I just have to tell our story."

Cindy Campbell, past IPI chair, now staff, was one of the visionaries behind the *Parking Matters* program. She understands the challenges faced in recrafting the industry's unwarranted poor image. Campbell says the program has elevated the industry's col-

lective self-concept by showcasing the critical role parking plays in the bigger picture of smart transportation, sustainable progress, economic development, successful downtowns, and livable cities. "I personally respond differently now when someone asks me what I do for a living," she says.

Influencing Target Audiences that Directly Impact the Industry

Having made headway in positively transforming the way the parking industry views itself, the *Parking Matters* program has conveyed that relatively newfound self-respect to key target audiences that directly affect the bottom line of the parking profession. The goal is to increase awareness of the vital role parking and parking professionals play in transportation, economic development and revitalization, traffic flow, college and university life, hospitality, commercial and residential real estate, sport and entertainment venues, retail, security, law enforcement, and more. Increasingly, parking professionals are being recognized for their specialized expertise and called in at

"I often have to give presentations or updates to our local city/county council. Shortly after the *Parking Matters* video first came out, I began one of my presentations with it. The council remained engaged during the entire two minutes, and I saw heads nodding and smiles appearing on faces. The video gave me confidence and credibility that I am a parking professional; our industry is about solving problems, and we need to be at the table. Nationally, it has been great to see the excellent feature stories and articles that the IPI *Parking Matters* program has initiated."

Gary A. Means, CAPP
Lexington Parking Authority

Parking Matters has brought about the intentional advancement of the industry through partnerships with and education of government officials, organizational-administrators, and the public about challenges faced and solved by professionals in the parking industry. Everyone benefits from more coordination and collaborative solutions thought about before projects are initiated, when there is time for proper input, budgeting, and planning to implement them correctly. These things do take time—much like turning a battleship—so we are starting to see better advance planning—better engagement, better partnerships.

Debbie Hoffmann
Texas A&M University

"The *Parking Matters* program has been a much-needed and very well-executed program that has elevated the reputation of the parking industry, improved our media presence, and enhanced the perceived professionalism of our entire industry."

L. Dennis Burns, CAPP
Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc.

"The value of *Parking Matters* is in its very name. Parking is no longer an afterthought. Parking now has a seat at the table in conversations about best practices in transportation and mobility. Effective parking management is valued as a key component of successful project implementation, land use policy decisions, and economic development."

Mike Estey
Seattle Department of Transportation

"When I joined IPI five years ago, it was rare to see an article or news story about parking that wasn't completely negative. Today, it's not uncommon to see parking professionals weighing in on everything from child safety to philanthropic investments in local communities—and in every medium, from local newspapers to "Good Morning America!" In my opinion, the *Parking Matters* program has helped elevate the image of the parking professional in a way that is both good for the industry and for the communities we all serve."

Vanessa K. Solesbee
Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc.

the earliest planning stages of construction to avoid issues that might arise later on.

The expertise and dedication of *Parking Matters* Committee members during the past five years has contributed greatly to the program's success. Few people have had as close a front-row seat to the process as committee Co-Chair and former IPI Board Chair Casey Jones, CAPP.

Jones stresses that the key to effectively reaching target audiences is to first understand their individual needs and then frame the messages within the context of how industry can serve these customers. "It is all about us having a service orientation," he says. "When we communicate to people from the vantage point of how we can better serve them—how parking expertise can address the various issues they are facing—we speak in a language that is positive, and that has helped us succeed."

Positive Impressions Fostered by the Media

Untold numbers have been reached through affirmative articles about the parking industry placed in related trade publications, including *American City and County*, *BOMA* (Building Owners and Management Association), *Building Construction & Design*, *Planning*, *Airport*, *Health Facilities Today*, *Government Buyer*, *Mass Transit*, *Public Sector Digest*, *College Services*, and *Government Technology*, among others. Messages such as, "Tapping the expertise of experienced parking professionals at the earliest stages of planning any project can make all the difference" have continually reinforced the value of the profession and its forward-looking embrace of technology and sustainability.

Sullivan is thrilled to have the media turning to IPI as a resource on parking. She points out that many trade publications that never considered parking as a topic for editorial coverage are now scheduling regular features, or in the case of *Airport Revenue News*, ongoing parking columns.

"We've had our share of fun consumer-oriented stories on local radio, TV news broadcasts, and even my favorite—a three-part 'extreme parking' segment on The Travel Channel," she says. "But the business media can have a much more powerful impact on the bottom line of the parking industry—opening up the eyes of hospital, airport, and university decision-makers and city elected officials about the benefits of including parking professionals when new projects are planned."

Helping the Public by Promoting Parking Safety

As is often the case with a business, industry, or association, there is much to be gained by embarking on public service initiatives, and finding ways to help the public has proved to be particularly rewarding for IPI. Under the umbrella of *Parking Safety Matters*, IPI has engaged in two public service initiatives since 2010: Preventing heatstroke among children in parked cars and parking education for teen drivers (in partnership with AAA Mid-Atlantic and the Mid-Atlantic Foundation for Safety and Education). A third program, on parking tips for seniors, also with AAA as a partner, is in the works. These messages are continually reinforced in press outreach and augmented by other seasonal, topical articles, such as smart parking strategies during the holidays.

These prove to be a win-win for everyone, says Sullivan—they attract media attention, delivering a wide audience and the ability to reach significant numbers of people with potentially life-saving safety measures, and they naturally showcase the parking industry in a very positive light.

Conrad feels that it goes even deeper than that. “It is our responsibility and obligation as an industry to promote the public’s safety,” he says. “The industry didn’t always see how critical that role is, and the program has given us the tools and resources to really make a difference, change the dynamic, and save lives.”

Recognizing Initiative within the Industry

In 2014, IPI inaugurated the *Parking Matters* Marketing & Communications Awards to recognize members who have enlightened audiences about the value of parking expertise, communicated about parking and transportation options and technologies, improved parking efficiencies, or otherwise conveyed positive parking messages that have helped advance the profession. “We wanted to shine a spotlight on organizations that are employing creative and effective measures to improve the image of parking,” says Conrad. “Productive marketing tells a story that builds a customer base, boosts revenue, and supports communications goals.”

The awards not only provide a vehicle for sharing positive program ideas; they are also a way to help professionals feel good about the jobs they are doing, says Conrad. “We have a terrific story to tell, and this is a great way to tell it,” he says. “But the awards have had an equally profound effect on the industry itself. When you showcase excellence and success, it breeds more excellence and success. Our members become inspired by their colleagues’ work, and that creates an exponential benefit.”

Connecting Parking to Environmental Sustainability

Perhaps the single-greatest paradigm shift for the parking industry has been toward sustainability, and many credit the *Parking Matters* program with helping alter people’s perspectives. The establishment of IPI’s Sustainability Committee—an idea first presented in the original *Parking Matters* plan—grew the association’s *Framework on Sustainability for Parking Design, Management, and Operations*, a continually evolving document that outlines the industry’s ambitious sustainability goals.

“As recently as five years ago, anyone who uttered ‘parking’ and ‘sustainability’ in the same sentence would have earned a good laugh,” Conrad says. Today the industry is being singled out for its progressive and proactive embrace of sustainable new technologies—largely as a result of the consistent efforts of *Parking Matters*.

A recent article in *Government Buyer* magazine is just one of many that have touted the parking industry

as a model for sustainability: “Along with technological improvements, the parking industry has been revolutionized by a heightened environmental awareness, with parking professionals assuming active roles in fostering sustainability,” it said.


Sullivan says sustainability and technology have aligned to support the affirmative messages behind the *Parking Matters* initiative. “From the revolution in technology to the focus on sustainability, everything just coalesced to create this perfect storm,” she says. “This could never have been achieved by individual companies working alone; it takes an association to do it credibly. It’s remarkable to see the collective karma that has powered our success, and what can be achieved when an association takes matters into its own hands.”

Educating Parking Professionals for an Ever-Changing Future

One of the benefits of *Parking Matters* yet to be realized is the influence it will have on future generations of parking professionals. It has paved the way for unprecedented enthusiasm for pursuing a career in the industry—so much, in fact, that courses of study on parking at higher institutions of learning are now being considered. IPI is currently working with institutions that offer urban planning degrees, including MIT, to incorporate parking knowledge into the curriculum. IPI Immediate Past Chair Liliana Rambo, CAPP, has helped direct the industry’s focus on education and predicts that a complete, university-level parking program may be on the horizon.

“Typically, people have entered the parking profession accidentally while they were in college, and then 25 years pass by, and they see that it is so much more than they ever originally thought,” she says. “As we continue to frame the profession through *Parking Matters*, we can attract more professionals to pursue the field because it offers so much—whether they are into technology, community development, business, service, or whatever. Judging from the relationships we are building with academics, I expect that we will see many more coming on board to support this growing industry.”

When you combine these interrelated elements, it is clear that the picture now being painted of the parking industry is radically different from that of just a few years ago. “We’ve come very far, but still have a long way to go,” Sullivan says. “This was never designed to be a short-term program. You can’t just wave a magic wand and change perceptions overnight. But we are moving the needle in the right direction and will continue to do so.”

“To me, *Parking Matters* isn’t a fad, or a slogan, or a tagline,” adds Conrad. “It has become the fabric of our industry. With the help of this program, we have altered the way parking professionals think about themselves, and, ultimately, how others view the industry.” 



MICHELE OSTROVE is a writer who frequently reports on industries and trade associations with innovative programs.