

Are We “Independent Bus Operators” or the “Private Bus Industry?”

Changing our terminology can improve our image.

What you say is not always what people hear. In communications, marketing, sales and politics, this is a universal truth. Political consultant Frank Luntz has even titled a book along those lines.

So when we refer to ourselves as “the private bus industry” as a natural way to distinguish ourselves from the publicly funded transits, it may seem perfectly logical to us. From our perspective, it shows a nice contrast between the taxpayer-supported transit systems and ABA-member small family operations that serve customers with virtually no federal subsidies. Or does it?

Despite that we all know 75 percent of ABA bus operator members have 10 or fewer coaches in their fleets, and that ours is a small industry compared to, say, trucking or automobiles, key audiences are unlikely to think of us in such a way when we call ourselves “the private bus industry.”

Indeed, once they hear private and industry, the media, elected officials and consumers may reflexively lump us in with images of corporate giants that are easily envisioned when the phrase “private industry” is mentioned. They’ll easily overlook the word “bus,” or, even worse, think the specific “private industry” being labeled doesn’t matter, given that it’s too easy to surmise those words automatically group us as part of big-business corporate America.

How else could Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) have made such a ruckus by labeling the partial federal fuel tax exemption for motorcoaches as “corporate welfare”?

As we prepare for the Congressional and media focus on 2009 Highway Reauthorization, it is imperative that we refer to ourselves using positive – and absolutely accurate – terminology to describe who we are. Doing so may go a long way to show how we’re different than the big businesses

in transportation, and ultimately help us position ourselves better for the reauthorization debates.

In that spirit, consider this proposed adjustment in ABA’s self-identification terminology: Rather than call ourselves “private bus operators,” let’s make a subtle but profound change and start referring to ourselves as “independent bus operators.”

The change may seem small, but its effect could be enormous. By eschewing “private industry,” we lose the corporate welfare stigma that is inaccurate anyway, and which distorts the true composition of our operator members. And the term “industry” implies smokestacks in rust-belt America despoiling the planet for their own greed.

Sound like the ABA community of which you are a member? Of course not. But it’s what others in Congress and the media hear when we call ourselves the “private bus industry.” Like Luntz said, “what you say isn’t always what people hear.”

But if we start talking about ourselves as “independent bus operators” or even the “independent bus operator community,” that simple change in labeling immediately softens our image, differentiates us from the big corporate behemoths, and creates a positive picture in the audience’s eye of the entrepreneurial, community-oriented, family run independent small businesses that define so many ABA operator members. The choice of “independent” was a careful one. “Free-market bus operators” sounds too much like a product of a libertarian think tank, and would never be taken seriously.

“Independent bus operators” sounds so moderate, so centrist, so reasonable. It’s our industry’s – er, community’s – equivalent of politicians calling themselves “progressives.” Everyone loves that term, and it creates images of forward-looking, visionary, modern leadership.

Forward-looking, visionary, modern ... isn’t that what we emphasize when we discuss the motorcoach role in transportation solutions?

It’s time our own self-identifying terms reflected the safe, green, convenient, affordable and accessible travel option ABA members provide to meet America’s mobility needs. ■

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