

TCRP

SYNTHESIS 45

Customer-Focused Transit

A Synthesis of Transit Practice

TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH BOARD
OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES

TRANSIT
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TCRP SYNTHESIS 45

Customer-Focused Transit

A Synthesis of Transit Practice

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TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH BOARD — THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES

WASHINGTON, D.C.
2002

TRANSIT COOPERATIVE RESEARCH PROGRAM

The nation's growth and the need to meet mobility, environmental, and energy objectives place demands on public transit systems. Current systems, some of which are old and in need of upgrading, must expand service area, increase service frequency, and improve efficiency to serve these demands. Research is necessary to solve operating problems, to adapt appropriate new technologies from other industries, and to introduce innovations into the transit industry. The Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) serves as one of the principal means by which the transit industry can develop innovative near-term solutions to meet demands placed on it.

The need for TCRP was originally identified in *TRB Special Report 213—Research for Public Transit: New Directions*, published in 1987 and based on a study sponsored by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). A report by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), *Transportation 2000*, also recognized the need for local, problem-solving research. TCRP, modeled after the longstanding and successful National Cooperative Highway Research Program, undertakes research and other technical activities in response to the needs of transit service providers. The scope of vice configuration, equipment, facilities, operations, human resources, maintenance, policy, and administrative practices.

TCRP was established under FTA sponsorship in July 1992. Proposed by the U.S. Department of Transportation, TCRP was authorized as part of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA). On May 13, 1992, a memorandum agreement outlining TCRP operating procedures was executed by the three cooperating organizations: FTA, the National Academy of Sciences, acting through the Transportation Research Board (TRB), and the Transit Development Corporation, Inc. (TDC), a nonprofit educational and research organization established by APTA. TDC is responsible for forming the independent governing board, designated as the TCRP Oversight and Project Selection (TOPS) Committee.

Research problem statements for TCRP are solicited periodically but may be submitted to TRB by anyone at anytime. It is the responsibility of the TOPS Committee to formulate the research program by identifying the highest priority projects. As part of the evaluation, the TOPS Committee defines funding levels and expected products.

Once selected, each project is assigned to an expert panel, appointed by the Transportation Research Board. The panels prepare project statements (requests for proposals), select contractors, and provide technical guidance and counsel throughout the life of the project. The process for developing research problem statements and selecting research agencies has been used by TRB in managing cooperative research programs since 1962. As in other TRB activities, TCRP project panels serve voluntarily without compensation.

Because research cannot have the desired impact if products fail to reach the intended audience, special emphasis is placed on disseminating TCRP results to the intended end-users of the research: transit agencies, service providers, and suppliers. TRB provides a series of research reports, syntheses of transit practice, and other supporting material developed by TCRP research. APTA will arrange for workshops, training aids, field visits, and other activities to ensure that results are implemented by urban and rural transit industry practitioners.

The TCRP provides a forum where transit agencies can cooperatively address common operational problems. TCRP results support and complement other ongoing transit research and training programs.

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The members of the technical advisory panel selected to monitor this project and to review this report were chosen for recognized scholarly competence and with due consideration for the balance of disciplines appropriate to the project. The opinions and conclusions expressed or implied are those of the research agency that performed the research, and while they have been accepted as appropriate by the technical panel, they are not necessarily those of the Transportation Research Board, the Transit Development Corporation, the National Research Council, or the Federal Transit Administration of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Each report is reviewed and accepted for publication by the technical panel according to procedures established and monitored by the Transportation Research Board Executive Committee and the Governing Board of the National Research Council.

Special Notice

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PREFACE

A vast storehouse of information exists on many subjects of concern to the transit industry. This information has resulted from research and from the successful application of solutions to problems by individuals or organizations. There is a continuing need to provide a systematic means for compiling this information and making it available to the entire transit community in a usable format. The Transit Cooperative Research Program includes a synthesis series designed to search for and synthesize useful knowledge from all available sources and to prepare documented reports on current practices in subject areas of concern to the transit industry.

This synthesis series reports on various practices, making specific recommendations where appropriate but without the detailed directions usually found in handbooks or design manuals. Nonetheless, these documents can serve similar purposes, for each is a compendium of the best knowledge available on those measures found to be successful in resolving specific problems. The extent to which these reports are useful will be tempered by the user's knowledge and experience in the particular problem area.

FOREWORD

*By Staff
Transportation
Research Board*

This synthesis will be of interest to senior managers interested in using customer-focused strategies at their transit agencies. Both established and newer agencies might use the synthesis to guide the establishment of effective customer-focused transit. The purpose of this report is to document the experiences of selected public transportation agencies in developing and implementing customer service programs. The synthesis examines the effectiveness of certain customer-focused activities in the categories of general interaction between the customer and the agency, obtaining and using customer input, involving employees in customer-focused public transportation, and achieving customer satisfaction. It details specific programs in the case studies of two public transportation agencies.

Administrators, practitioners, and researchers are continually faced with issues or problems on which there is much information, either in the form of reports or in terms of undocumented experience and practice. Unfortunately, this information often is scattered or not readily available in the literature, and, as a consequence, in seeking solutions, full information on what has been learned about an issue or problem is not assembled. Costly research findings may go unused, valuable experience may be overlooked, and full consideration may not be given to the available methods of solving or alleviating the issue or problem. In an effort to correct this situation, the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) Synthesis Project, carried out by the Transportation Research Board as the research agency, has the objective of reporting on common transit issues and problems and synthesizing available information. The synthesis reports from this endeavor constitute a TCRP publication series in which various forms of relevant information are assembled into single, concise documents pertaining to a specific problem or closely related issues.

This document from the Transportation Research Board integrates information from a search of available literature with survey responses obtained from key staff at 33 transit agencies across the country. Supplemental materials were supplied by many of these agencies. Case study information was collected from Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) and the Miami Valley Regional Transit Authority (RTA).

To develop this synthesis in a comprehensive manner and to ensure inclusion of significant knowledge, available information was assembled from numerous sources, including a number of public transportation agencies. A topic panel of experts in the subject area was established to guide the researchers in organizing and evaluating the collected data, and to review the final synthesis report.

This synthesis is an immediately useful document that records practices that were acceptable within the limitations of the knowledge available at the time of its preparation. As the processes of advancement continue, new knowledge can be expected to be added to that now at hand.

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This study was managed by Donna L. Vlasak, Senior Program Officer, who worked with the consultant, the Topic Panel, and the J-7 project committee in the development and review of the report. Assistance in Topic Panel selection and project scope development was provided by Jon Williams, Manager, Synthesis Studies. Don Tippman was responsible for editing and production. Cheryl Keith assisted in meeting logistics and distribution of the questionnaire and draft reports.

Christopher W. Jenks, Manager, Transit Cooperative Research Program, assisted TCRP staff in project review.

Information on current practice was provided by many transit agencies. Their cooperation and assistance was most helpful.

CUSTOMER-FOCUSED TRANSIT

SUMMARY

There is a perception among some public transportation stakeholders that customer service strategies of public transportation agencies lag behind those of other public and private service providers. There are some service providers and retailers (e.g., Federal Express, Southwest Airlines, Disney, and Nordstrom) that enjoy a strong reputation for providing responsive customer service in their businesses. In the year 2001, the number one strategic priority of the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) was to “Place the Transit Customer First.” TCRP’s Oversight and Project Selection Committee noted that, “The American consumer society is demanding; no industry can prosper that does not place the customer first.” Public transportation agencies believe that customer-focused public transportation can make a difference.

This synthesis highlights what public transportation agencies think are the most important customer-focused strategies and provides examples of innovative approaches to customer-focused public transportation. The purpose of this synthesis report is to document the experiences of selected public transportation agencies in trying to develop and implement agency-wide, results-oriented, customer-focused programs. More specifically, the synthesis examines the effectiveness of certain customer-focused activities in the categories of

- General interaction between the customer and the public transportation system,
- Obtaining and using customer input,
- Involving employees in customer-focused public transportation, and
- Achieving customer satisfaction.

In addition, the synthesis examines innovative public transportation agency programs that have been effective as customer service methodologies. Case studies of two public transportation agencies, Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) in Dallas, Texas, and the Miami Valley Regional Transit Authority (RTA) in Dayton, Ohio, provide detailed examples of customer-focused programs that work.

This synthesis can be useful to all public transportation agencies by presenting information about how some public transportation agencies are using effective customer-focused strategies at their agencies. Established systems could use the synthesis to see how they might become more effective, whereas newer systems could use the synthesis as a guide in the establishment of effective customer-focused strategies.

Surveys were mailed to 61 public transportation agencies that were determined to have experience in implementing customer-focused strategies and 54% (33) responded. The overall response appears to be representative of the transit industry, with good distribution with respect to system size and geographic location.

The most effective methods rated by the agencies for general interaction with the customer are the transit system map, telephone information service, and public timetables by route. The use of the transit system map rated the highest, although only 64% of respondents

used them. The most effective methods rated by the agencies for obtaining and using customer input are on-board surveys, complaints, and telephone surveys. The most effective methods for involving employees in customer-focused strategies are customer-focused training for operators, supervisors, and station attendants; messages from department heads; messages from the chief executive officer; allowing employees to make customer-focused service decisions; and performance-based compensation. The most effective methods rated by the agencies for achieving customer satisfaction are frequent rider discounts and frequent rider benefits. The factors that the agencies considered to be most important to the customer are on-time service, frequency of service, courtesy of employees, and personal safety.

Supplemental materials were submitted by 52% of respondents. These materials were reviewed to identify those that were customer focused. Most often respondents provided copies of system maps, public timetables, route brochures, customer satisfaction surveys, and employee training materials. In addition to the materials submitted, a computer search of public transportation system websites for selected agencies was done to determine if the websites were customer focused. Among the most innovative materials submitted were

- Customer-focused mission statements from Bay Area Rapid Transit (Oakland, California) and the Capital District Transportation Authority (Albany, New York);
- Use of a planning technique by Valley Transit (Phoenix, Arizona) called Consensus Driven Community Bus, which allowed the customers to design local routes;
- Customer-focused employee training modules from Bay Area Rapid Transit, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (Washington, D.C.), and Chicago Transit Authority (Chicago, Illinois);
- Annual surveys of residents (riders and nonriders) to determine perceptions and trends about service by New York City Transit (New York); and
- Use of customer comment cards (prepaid mailers) on board buses and trains soliciting feedback on service by the Regional Transportation District (Denver, Colorado).

Two of the public transportation agencies that participated in the survey [Dallas Area Rapid Transit (Dallas, Texas) and the Miami Valley Regional Transit Authority (Dayton, Ohio)] were selected for a more detailed description and analysis, because these systems employ a number of customer-focused strategies that could serve as models for other public transportation systems.

By far the major obstacle reported by public transportation agencies involves the lack of resources/funding. Many of the responding agencies could not quantify a budget for activities that involved transit employees in customer-focused public transportation and others reported a small or minimal budget for such activities. Several respondents reported that union opposition and/or indifferent employee attitudes limit positive employee involvement.

The overwhelming majority of the public transportation agencies responding to the survey recognize the importance of implementing customer-focused strategies. The agencies believe that implementing such programs will result in increased customer satisfaction and public transportation ridership; primary goals of the transit industry.

This synthesis represents an important first step in examining customer-focused strategies that are effective in increasing public transportation ridership and satisfaction. More detailed analysis is necessary to understand the “best practices” associated with customer-focused strategies. Additional research is necessary to determine which customer-focused programs have the greatest impact on increased public transportation ridership and customer

satisfaction. Furthermore, there could be research on new and innovative customer-focused strategies derived from examining other industries and their use of technology. The results of the synthesis revealed that the public transportation industry uses relatively few specific methods to achieve customer satisfaction (e.g., frequent rider discounts and guaranteed ride home). Additional research is needed to provide the industry with cost-effective methods to achieve customer satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

According to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), in the year 2000, public transportation passengers took an estimated 9.4 billion trips. This total represented a 3.5% increase over the previous year and is the highest number of passenger trips taken in more than 40 years (1). Figure 1 charts the total number of trips taken on all modes of public transportation for the 10-year-period, 1990 to 2000. It shows that, after slumping during the early part of the decade, ridership increased in each of the past 5 years, for an aggregate total of 21% during that period. This growth was especially impressive because automobile driving increased by just 11% during the same period. According to APTA, the growth in public transportation ridership is attributed to several factors, including the expansion of service with new rail lines and extensions (e.g., in Salt Lake City, Utah; Denver, Colorado; San Jose, California; Washington, D.C.; Dallas–Fort Worth, Texas); higher levels of capital investments by federal, state, and local sources (\$8.9 billion in 1999 versus \$4.9 billion in 1990; see Figure 2); a flourishing national economy; and enhanced customer services by the nation’s public transportation systems.

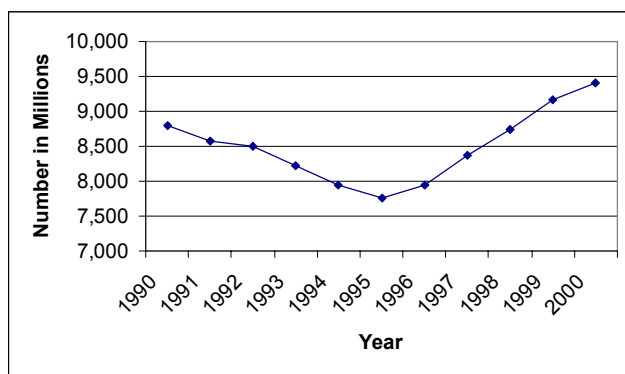


FIGURE 1 Unlinked passenger trips on transit.

Public transportation industry officials are aware, however, that even with these ridership increases, 2000 U.S. Census data reported that the *percentage* of the total work force traveling by public transportation declined slightly from 5.3% in 1990 to 5.2% in 2000 (2). This shows that there are many more opportunities to attract more passengers to travel by public transportation.

As part of the growth in public transportation ridership, it has been postulated that several public transportation

agencies have undertaken efforts to focus their attention on customer service and satisfaction. The market structure of public transportation, in which there is generally a single provider in a service area, does not have the same market conditions as a structure that has competition. Public transportation agencies compete for ridership primarily with the private automobile, which has a completely different delivery system for travel. According to APTA, the typical annual cost to a public transportation user is substantially less than the typical single-occupant personal vehicle driving cost (\$189 to \$2,077 for public transportation users versus \$4,826 to \$9,685 for a person who uses a private automobile) (1). Even with this cost-to-user differential, substantially more people drive alone than use public transportation. To retain and attract passengers, public transportation agencies must implement customer-focused strategies.

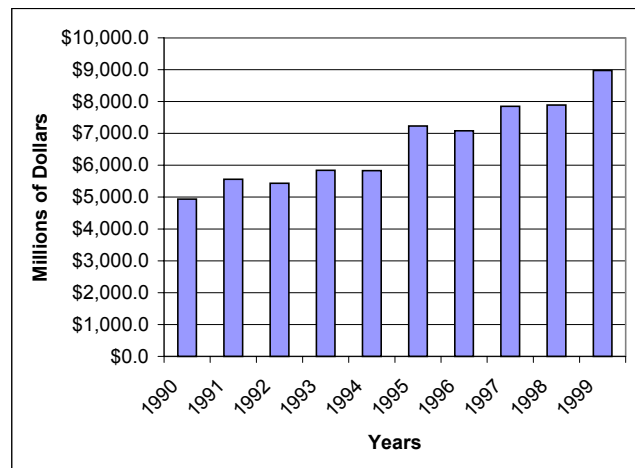


FIGURE 2 Capital funding for transit.

There is a perception that customer service strategies of public transportation agencies lag behind those of other public and private service providers. The private sector (e.g., Federal Express, Southwest Airlines, Disney, and Nordstrom) enjoys a strong reputation for providing responsive customer service in their businesses. As an example, the Southwest Airlines Mission Statement, which is stated in bold type on the first page of its “Customer Service Commitment” explicitly states that the company is dedicated “to the highest quality of Customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride and Company Spirit.”

The company document that supports this mission statement, which is posted on the company website, describes

its general interactions with the customer, methods of obtaining customer input, the involvement of its employees, and its commitment to achieving customer satisfaction through “we always try to do the right thing.” According to a November 11, 2001, article in *The Washington Post*, Southwest Airlines most likely strengthened its reputation for customer service in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, by

- Not reducing service like most other airlines,
- Not laying off employees,
- Offering reduced fares to customers,
- Reducing the advance booking requirements for the lowest fares from 7 days to 3 days, and
- Assigning uniformed Southwest employees to assist contracted security staff in moving customers through security checkpoints.

The service provided by Southwest Airlines is not premium service, no meals are served, no first class cabin is offered, seats are not reserved, and very few routes are non-stop. However, Southwest Airlines has one of the highest on-time performance records in the industry and it consistently offers the lowest fares. It has among the best customer loyalty programs, offering free flight coupons after as few as four roundtrips, and the free flight and drink coupons can be used more readily than those awarded by the other airlines.

The service operated by Southwest Airlines actually provides a good parallel to service provided by public transportation systems. Compared to the competition (private automobiles), public transportation is not a premium service, seats are not reserved, food is not allowed, and very few routes are non-stop. However, just like Southwest Airlines, the cost savings can be significant.

Therefore, the questions to consider are why does Southwest Airlines attract so many new passengers each year when other airlines are losing money? How can public transportation increase its market share of the lucrative travel-to-work trips? Equally important, or perhaps more so, how can public transportation increase its share of nonwork, off-peak trips, since it often has the capacity to provide more of these trips with little or no increases in operating costs? This is especially relevant with respect to local tourist travel, where generally no automobile is available. Can customer focus make the difference? Southwest Airlines and many other service providers believe it does.

As noted earlier, the number one strategic priority of TCRP in the year 2001 was “Place the Transit Customer First” (4). This synthesis highlights what public transportation agencies believe are the most important customer service strategies and provides examples of innovative approaches to customer-focused public transportation programs.

SYNTHESIS OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this synthesis report is to document the experiences of selected public transportation agencies in trying to develop and implement agency-wide, results-oriented, customer-focused programs. More specifically, the synthesis examines the effectiveness of certain customer-focused activities in the following categories:

- General interaction between the customer and the public transportation agency,
- Obtaining and using customer input,
- Involving employees in customer-focused public transportation, and
- Achieving customer satisfaction.

In addition, the synthesis examines innovative public transportation agency programs that have been effective as a customer service methodology and detail specific program in the case studies of two public transportation agencies.

The public transportation industry uses numerous methods in each of the above-mentioned activities; for example, having a transit system map as a general form of interaction between customer and transit system and using complaints as a method to obtain customer input. Many of these methods are probably effective in all customer service programs, whereas others have varying levels of impact, depending on the public transportation environment of a particular area. For example, New York City Transit (NYCT) found that during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, web-based information on the status of bus and subway service operating in Manhattan near the World Trade Center proved to be extremely effective. For public bus systems in smaller urban areas, public forums might prove to be more effective in obtaining and using customer input than the same or similar method in larger, rail-oriented systems. Table 1 presents examples of the types of customer-focused methods in each of the key categories.

Because there are many customer-focused strategies that can be used to achieve customer satisfaction, this synthesis documents which methods are used most often by public transportation systems with active marketing programs.

The synthesis goal is to document effective methods that are used in customer-focused strategies. Information from the synthesis was solicited from those public transportation systems that are the best at implementing customer-focused strategies. Survey respondents were requested to rank the effectiveness of all the methods that they used. As a result of this approach, the research obtained the *opinions* of the respondents as to those methodologies that are the most effective in the public transportation industry. Therefore, this synthesis could be useful to

TABLE 1
EXAMPLES OF CUSTOMER-FOCUSED ACTIVITIES

General Customer Interaction	Obtaining and Using Customer Input	Involving Employees	Achieving Customer Satisfaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transit System Map • Public Timetables by Route • Telephone Information Centers • Web-Based Information • Information Kiosks/Bus Stop Signs • Automated Information Kiosks/Touch Screens • Information Brochures • Advertising (print, radio, or TV) • Public Forums • Mission Statements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complaints • On-Board Surveys • Telephone Surveys • Focus Groups • Employee Meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Message from Policy Making Body • Message from CEO • Message from Department Head • Customer-Focused Training for Station Agents, Operators, or All Employees • Periodic Visits by CEO or Department Heads to Transfer Centers, Rail Stations, etc. • Events to Build Employee Morale • Allowing Employees to Make Customer-Focused Service Decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service Guarantees • Guaranteed Ride Home • Frequent Rider Discounts • Frequent Rider Benefits • Customer Bill of Rights

all public transportation agencies because it offers a “benchmark” by which public transportation agencies can assess how effectively they are utilizing customer-focused strategies. Both established systems and newer systems can use the synthesis as a guide to the establishment of effective customer-focused strategies.

METHODOLOGY AND ORGANIZATION

This synthesis documents the experiences of selected public transportation agencies in developing and implementing customer service programs. Information presented in the synthesis was gathered from the following sources:

- Literature searches of TRB’s Transportation and Information System (TRIS) and APTA’s Transit Search website,
- A survey of 33 public transportation agencies throughout the United States,
- Websites of various public transportation agencies [e.g., the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA)] and other service providers and retailers (e.g., Southwest Airlines).

Because this synthesis endeavors to document some of the most successful customer-focused methods in the public transportation industry, it was important to solicit information from the “industry leaders.” Emphasis was placed on identifying those agencies that had documented any efforts to implement customer-focused programs. Issues of the APTA weekly newspaper, “Passenger Transport,” covering the past 2 years, were searched to identify which agencies publicized local campaigns that were customer focused. Agencies that participate in APTA’s Visi-

bility, Image and Positioning (VIP) Task Force and its Marketing and Communications Steering Committee were identified as entities that might have customer-focused activities. Numerous websites for public transportation agencies were reviewed to ascertain the type of customer information provided. Sixty-one public transportation agencies were contacted and 33 (54%) responded.

A detailed survey was developed to obtain public transportation agency information on customer-focused activities. The 35-question survey was designed to

- Collect general information on each agency (e.g., size, budget, passenger, fare, mode, and funding),
- Identify customer-focused methods,
- Ascertain agency opinions on the effectiveness of customer-focused methods, and
- Identify issues/impediments related to customer-focused methods (e.g., labor/work rules and funding constraints).

The survey is included in the synthesis as Appendix A.

The remaining sections of this report present the results of the research effort as follows:

- Chapter 2 presents the results of the survey. Each public transportation agency surveyed is identified according to size, region, and mode. The response rate for completed questionnaires is discussed on an overall basis and by category. The results of the survey are quantified and responses to key questions are discussed.
- Chapter 3 describes specific methods currently used by survey respondents to implement customer-

focused strategies, including customer-focused mission statements, customer outreach efforts, employee involvement in customer-focused service, specific programs used to place the customer first, and how agencies are using customer input to improve service.

- Chapter 4 describes in more detail the customer-focused strategies employed by two of the public transportation agencies that responded to the survey. These agencies, Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART), a large, multi-modal operator in Dallas, Texas, and the Miami Valley Regional Transit Authority (RTA) of Dayton, Ohio, a medium-size bus system, have implemented a number of strategies that could serve as starting points for comparable systems. In these case studies, specific information on strategies implemented and funding dedicated to the efforts are presented.
- Chapter 5 addresses important issues identified in the survey and literature search, including obstacles faced and overcome in attempting to involve employees in customer-focused transportation, the most important reasons for implementing customer-focused strategies, funding issues based on performance measures, and additional research that should be done on the topic.
- Chapter 6 provides the overall conclusions of the synthesis effort.
- Appendixes include:
 - Survey questionnaire (Appendix A),
 - List of respondents (Appendix B),
 - Survey data summary tables (Appendix C),
 - DART sample documents (Appendix D), and
 - Miami Valley RTA strategic approach to customer first organization (Appendix E).

DATA COLLECTION RESULTS

Of the 61 surveys sent to public transportation agencies, 54% (33) were completed and returned. Seventeen agencies provided additional materials that further documented customer-focused methods. In compiling the original list of 61 agencies, every attempt was made to have a representative sampling of the public transportation industry. The criteria for selection are described in Table 2.

The survey questionnaire requested considerable information on the public transportation agency itself and its service area, including

- Geographic area (square miles),
- Population,
- Modes of operation,
- Operating budget,
- Capital budget,
- Revenue passengers,
- Percentage of transit-dependent passengers,
- Trip purpose,
- Base adult fare,
- Sources of local funding,
- Number of employees, and
- Mission statement.

The survey questionnaire then requested that each public transportation agency identify which customer-focused methods they used (see Table 2) and then rate the effectiveness of that method. The four categories of methods are

- General interaction between the customer and the public transportation system,
- Obtaining and using customer input,
- Involving employees in customer-focused public transportation, and
- Achieving customer satisfaction.

SUMMARY OF GENERAL INFORMATION ON PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION AGENCIES SURVEYED

In all, 33 public transportation agencies responded to the survey and are listed in Appendix B. Figure 3 shows the locations of the agencies, which have good distribution with respect to system size and geographic location. Table 3 and Figures 4 and 5 summarize the agencies by geographic location (region), system size, and mode of operation. Several agency statistics are worthy of a brief comparison among all survey respondents. First, Figure 6 summarizes the base adult fares of all respondents. These fares range from \$0.50 to \$2.00, with most fares between \$1.00 and \$1.50. Figure 7 summarizes the responses of those agencies (19 of 33) that have information on the percentage of passengers that depend on public transportation as a means of travel; that is, transit dependency. Of the 19 agencies responding to the question regarding transit dependency, 53% reported that at least one-half of its passengers have no other means of travel. In only two instances are public transportation agencies competing with the

TABLE 2
CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION AGENCIES TO BE SURVEYED

Criteria	Description
Concrete Evidence of Customer-Focused Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TCRP Topic Panel recommendation • APTA “Passenger Transport” articles on subject • Participation on APTA’s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Visibility, Image & Positioning (VIP) Task Force – Marketing and Communications Steering Committee • Agency website information
Geographic Locations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Northeast • Southeast • Midwest • Rocky Mountain/Southwest • Far West/Hawaii
System Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small bus—fewer than 50 vehicles • Medium bus—51–250 vehicles • Large bus—more than 250 vehicles • Multi-modal—bus and rail • Rail
Modes of Service Operated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bus with paratransit • Rail—light, heavy, or commuter

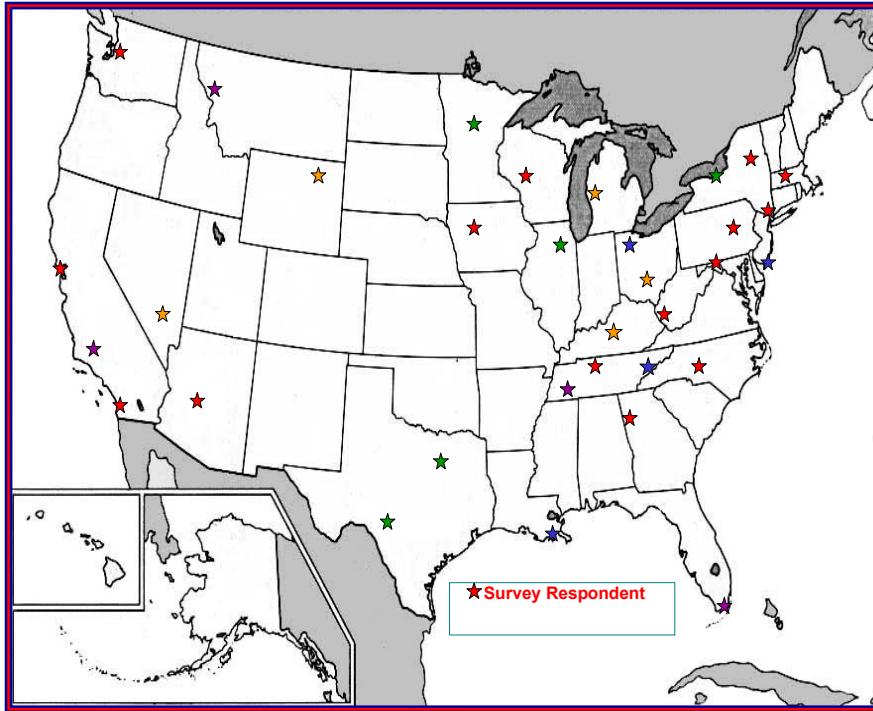


FIGURE 3 Locations of public transportation agencies responding to survey.

TABLE 3
PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION AGENCIES RESPONDING TO SURVEY BY GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION, SYSTEM SIZE, AND MODE OF OPERATION

System Size and Mode	Survey Respondents (Region Code)
Rail Only	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bay Area Rapid Transit—Oakland, CA (5) • New York City Transit, NY (1)
Multi-Modal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority, OH (3) • Miami–Dade Transit, FL (2) • Chicago Transit Authority, IL (3) • Dallas Area Rapid Transit, TX (4) • Southeastern Pennsylvania Public Transportation Authority, PA (1) • Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, GA (2) • Regional Transportation District—Denver, CO (4) • Metropolitan Transit Development Board—San Diego, CA (5)
Large Bus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority—Washington, DC (1) • Seattle Metro, WA (5) • Phoenix Transit, AZ (5) • Capital District Transportation Authority—Albany, NY (1) • Honolulu Transit, HI (5) • Transit Authority of River City—Louisville, KY (2) • Metro Transit—Minneapolis, MN (3) • Regional Transportation Commission—Las Vegas, NV (5) • VIA Metropolitan Transit—San Antonio, TX (4)
Medium Bus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memphis Area Transit Authority, TN (2) • Long Beach Transit, CA (5) • Delaware Transit Corporation, Wilmington, DE (1) • Greater Hartford Transit District, CT (1) • Charlotte Area Transit System, NC (2) • Capital Area Transportation Authority—Lansing, MI (3) • Regional Transportation Authority—Rochester, NY (1) • Miami Valley Regional Transit Authority—Dayton, OH (3) • Madison Metro, WI (3)
Small Bus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knoxville Area Transit, TN (2) • CY Ride—Ames, IA (3) • Mountain Line—Missoula, MT (4) • TRANSPO—South Bend, IN (3) • The Transit Authority—Huntington, WV (2)

Notes: Geographic location key (number of respondents): (1) Northeast (7), (2) Southeast (7), (3) Midwest (8), (4) Rocky Mountain/Southwest (6), and (5) Far West/Hawaii (5).

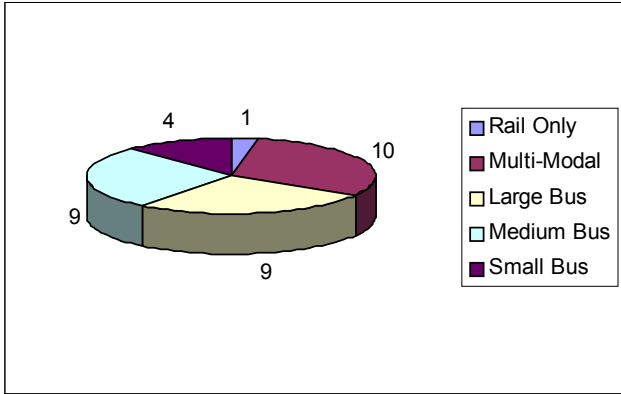


FIGURE 4 Survey respondents by size and service mode.

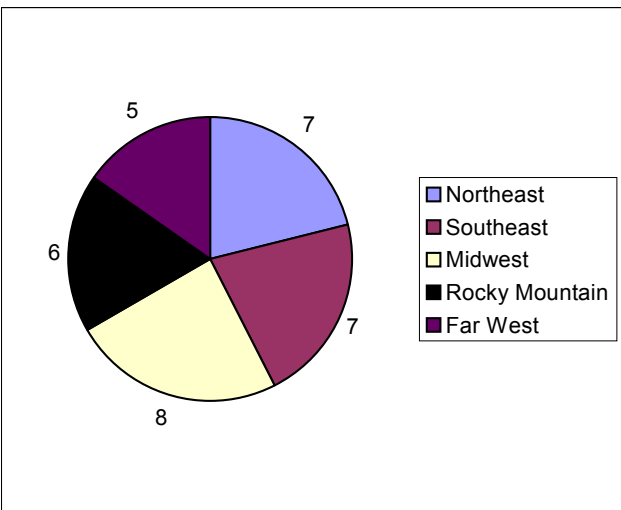


FIGURE 5 Survey respondents by region.

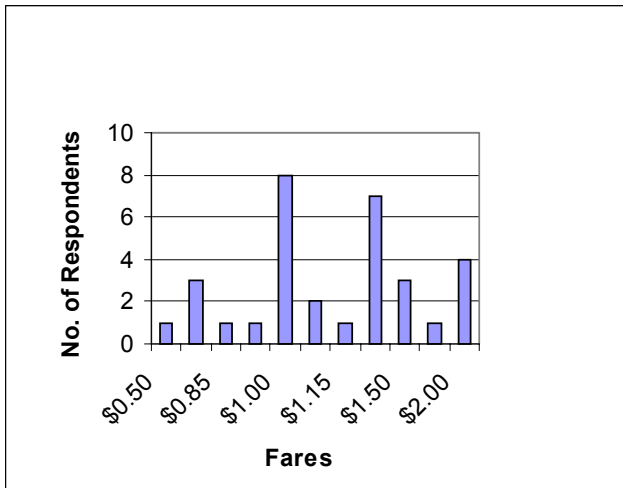


FIGURE 6 Base fare of survey respondents.

automobile for a substantial number (more than 80%) of its passengers. These statistics show that public transportation is not competing successfully with the automobile, despite its lower cost. Therefore, the opportunity exists for public transportation to significantly increase its market share by investing in enhanced customer-focused strategies that are

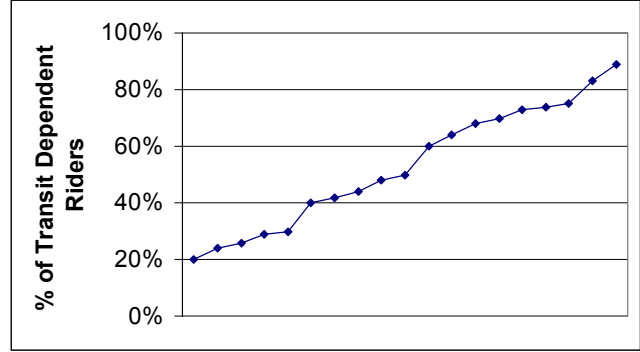


FIGURE 7 Range of transit dependency for 19 agencies responding.

based on broad consumer surveys that identify those factors that would attract and retain riders.

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES ON METHODS USED IN CUSTOMER-FOCUSED PROGRAMS

The following summaries show how often the industry leaders use a particular method in its customer-focused programs. Details on the summary tables are provided in Appendix C.

General Interaction Between the Customer and the Public Transportation System

Eleven specific methods were identified in the survey for general interaction between the customer and the public transportation system. Figure 8 summarizes the frequency of use of each method by the responding agencies. Four methods, telephone information services, advertising (print media), advertising (radio/TV), and web-based information were used by 100% of the respondents. A substantial number used informational brochures (32), public timetables by route (32), information kiosks/bus stop signs (30), and public forums (30). Interestingly, public transportation system maps were only used by 21 agencies (64%).

Obtaining and Using Customer Input

There are five specific methods identified in the survey for obtaining and using customer input. Figure 9 summarizes the use of each method by the public transportation agencies. Complaints from the public were most often used to obtain customer input (32), followed in succession by public forums (30), on-board surveys (30), telephone surveys (23), and employee meetings (20).

Involving Employees in Customer-Focused Public Transportation

Nine specific methods were identified in the survey for involving employees in customer-focused public transportation.

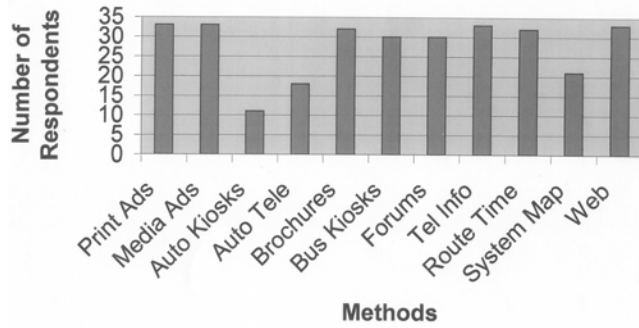


FIGURE 8 Methods used for providing information to customers.

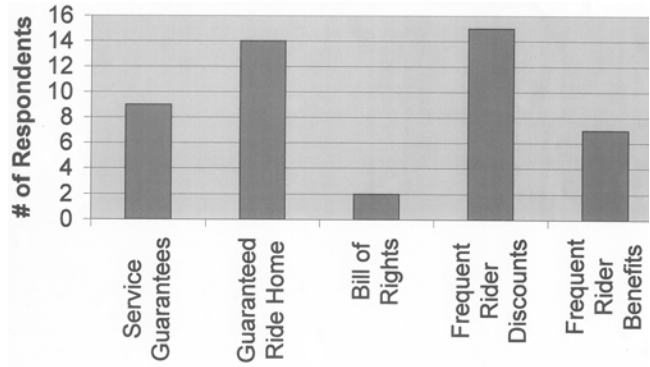


FIGURE 11 Methods used to achieve customer satisfaction.

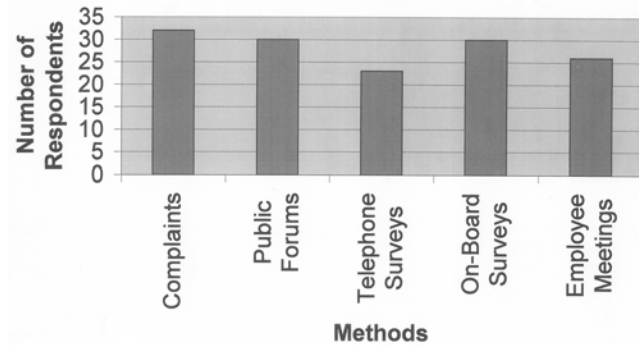


FIGURE 9 Methods used to obtain customer input.

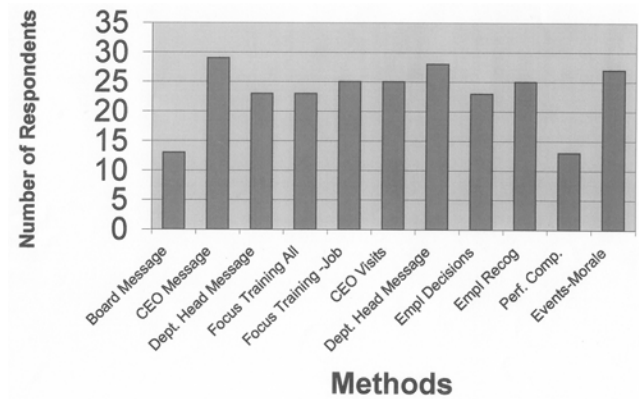


FIGURE 10 Methods used to involve employees.

Figure 10 summarizes the use of each method by the public transportation agencies. The message from the chief executive officer (CEO) is most often used by the agencies to involve employees (29), followed closely by messages from department heads (28), events to build morale (27), focused training of operators, supervisors, station attendants (25), CEO visits (25), and employee recognition programs (25). Fewer than half of the agencies used a message from the policy-making body (13) and performance-based compensation (13).

Methods to Achieve Customer Satisfaction

Five specific methods were identified in the survey to achieve customer satisfaction. Figure 11 summarizes the

use of each method by the public transportation agencies. None of the methods were used by a majority of the agencies, with the most frequent being rider discounts (15) and guaranteed ride home (14). Only seven “other” methods were identified by the agencies surveyed.

Customer loyalty promotions are increasingly pervasive in the private sector. Airlines, restaurants, and hotels encourage repeat business by offering “free” airline travel, meals, or hotel stays for customers that frequently use their service. The public transportation industry could easily replicate this type of customer loyalty incentive program. Although most public transportation agencies do offer discounted weekly and/or monthly passes, none of the survey respondents indicated that their agency offers “free” rides to encourage frequent riders.

SUMMARY OF EFFECTIVENESS/IMPORTANCE OF CUSTOMER-FOCUSED PROGRAMS

In addition to asking whether or not agencies use a particular method, the survey questionnaire requested that agencies rate the effectiveness of those methods in their customer-focused programs. The effectiveness scale is a rating of from one to five, with one being low and five being high. Every agency participated in the effectiveness rating of the methods listed on Table 1. The agencies only rated the effectiveness of those methods used in their customer-focused program. These ratings serve as an indicator of how important a particular method is in achieving its objective. The ratings might be useful in determining which method an individual public transportation agency might employ given a limited budget.

General Interaction Between the Customer and the Public Transportation System

Figure 12 summarizes the effectiveness of the various methods identified in the survey for general interaction between the customer and the public transportation system.

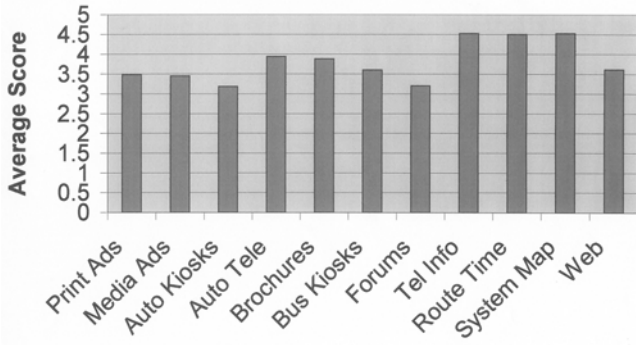


FIGURE 12 Effectiveness ratings of providing information to customers.

The most effective methods cited were the transit system map (average score of 4.52 out of a possible 5), telephone information service (4.52), and timetables by route (4.50). The use of the transit system map rates highest, even though only 64% of the respondents used them. The use of an automated telephone information service rated high in effectiveness (3.94), even though only 18 of 33 agencies (55%) used it.

Obtaining and Using Customer Input

Figure 13 summarizes the effectiveness of the various methods identified in the survey for obtaining and using customer input. The most effective methods rated were on-board surveys (4.23), complaints (4.16), and telephone surveys (4.00). The telephone survey rating is interesting, given that only 23 agencies (69%) use them to obtain customer input.

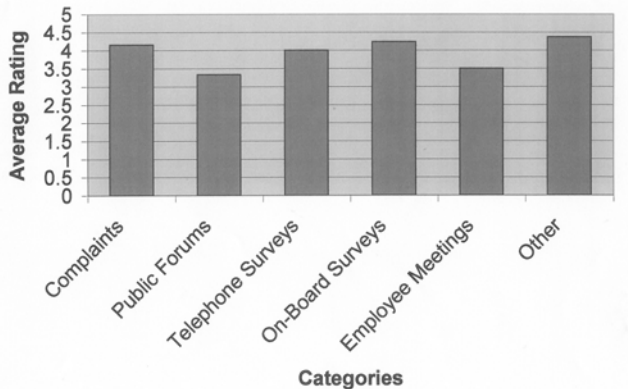


FIGURE 13 Effectiveness ratings of methods obtaining customer input.

The survey also asked all of the agencies about the importance of customer input into decision making in the following areas:

- Routes
- Schedules
- Fares

- Budgets
- Funding sources
- Facilities
- Quality of service.

Figure 14 summarizes the importance of customer input in public transportation agency decision making. The most important areas for customer input as rated by the agencies are quality of service (4.42), route planning (4.24), and schedules (4.06). Despite literature within the customer satisfaction field that highlights the importance of using customer satisfaction information to influence an organization’s budget priorities, many agencies saw the use of this information in budget and funding matters as less important, with average ratings of just 2.61 and 2.34, respectively.

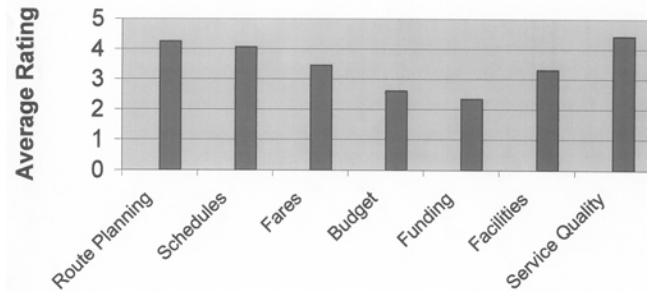


FIGURE 14 How important is customer input in decision making?

Involving Employees in Customer-Focused Public Transportation

Figure 15 summarizes the effectiveness of the various methods identified in the survey for involving employees in customer-focused public transportation. The most effective methods rated were customer-focused training for operators, supervisors, and station attendants (4.08); message from department heads (4.04); message from the CEO (3.93); allowing employees to make customer-focused service decisions (3.91); and performance-based compensation (3.85). The survey revealed that 25 of 33 agencies (76%) allow employees to make customer-focused service decisions and 12 of 33 (37%) have performance-based compensation programs.

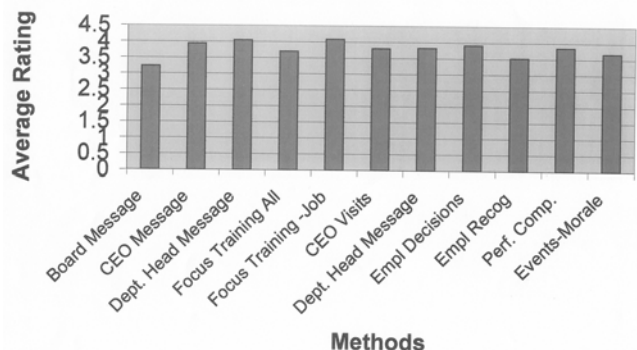


FIGURE 15 Effectiveness ratings of methods to involve employees.

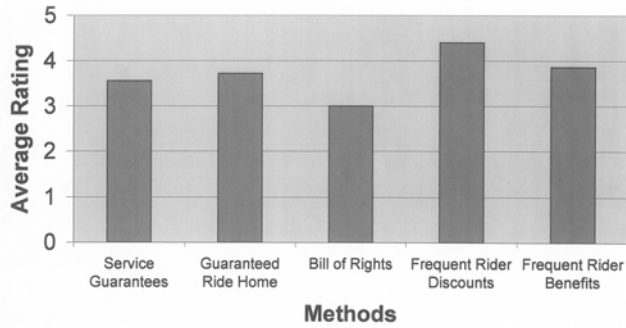


FIGURE 16 Effectiveness ratings of methods to achieve customer satisfaction.

Methods to Achieve Customer Satisfaction

Figure 16 summarizes the effectiveness of the various methods identified in the survey for achieving customer satisfaction. The most effective methods rated were frequent rider discounts (4.40) and frequent rider benefits (3.86).

The survey also asked respondents to identify and rank which of the following factors were most important to customers:

- On-time service;
- Frequency of service;

- Pricing/value;
- Courtesy of employees;
- Cleanliness of buses, trains;
- Cleanliness of passenger facilities, stations;
- Personal safety on buses, trains; and
- Personal safety in passenger facilities, stations.

The factors that the agencies considered to be most important are on-time service (4.88), frequency of service (4.67), courtesy of employees (4.55), and personal safety (4.48 for facilities and 4.41 for vehicles). Figure 17 summarizes these responses.

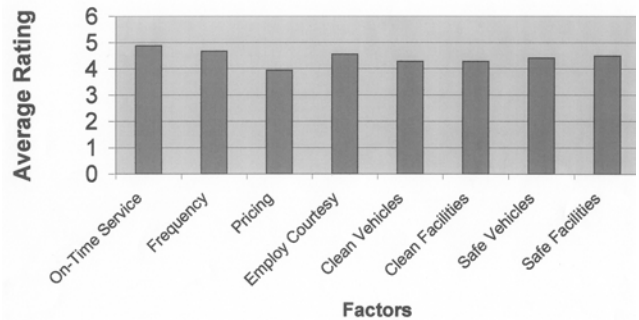


FIGURE 17 Factors most important to customers.

CURRENT PRACTICES: METHODS OF IMPLEMENTING CUSTOMER-FOCUSED STRATEGIES IN THE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRY

The purpose of this chapter is to describe innovative methods currently used to implement customer-focused strategies and submitted by survey respondents. These methods are organized by the format used in the survey: general interaction between the customer and the public transportation system; obtaining and using customer input; involving employees in customer-focused public transportation; and methods to achieve customer satisfaction. Although survey results were described in the previous chapter, the goal here is to provide examples of ongoing customer-focused programs used by public transportation systems based on supplemental marketing and training materials provided by some of the respondents. Survey respondents were asked to supply the following materials, if available:

- Mission statement,
- System maps or brochures,
- Employee training materials,
- Customer-focused operating procedures,
- CEO message re: Customer-focused public transportation,
- Station manager/transfer center programs,
- Ambassador training, and
- Public information on customer-focused services or programs.

Fifty-two percent (17 of 33) of the respondents did submit supplemental materials. Most often, respondents provided copies of system maps, route brochures, customer satisfaction surveys, and employee training materials. In addition to the materials submitted, a computer search of public transportation system websites was done for selected agencies to determine if the websites are customer focused.

GENERAL INTERACTION BETWEEN THE CUSTOMER AND THE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

There are many ways to address the information needs of the customer. This section describes examples of customer-focused methods of providing information to the customer. The types of supplemental materials most often submitted that relate to general interaction with the customer are

- Mission statements,
- Public route timetables, and
- System maps.

These materials were reviewed to determine which contained a customer focus; that is, those documents that mention an agency commitment to the public or appeared to be developed with the customer as the primary focus. Additionally, numerous public transportation agency websites were reviewed to identify those that contain customer-focused information. Although all of these materials are designed for the public, most appeared to be internally focused on the system itself or on the service provided by the system. Some of the materials, however, do provide excellent examples of customer-focused strategies.

Mission Statements

Most successful organizations have a mission statement that is usually developed during a consultative process with policy makers, management, and staff. A mission statement is used in most businesses to provide a consistent focus and vision throughout the organization and to remind employees of the *reason* for their work. The mission statement could be publicized to customers so that they understand the organization's priorities and have an expectation for service. Most of the survey respondents (94%) stated that they do have a mission statement; however, the majority (58%) acknowledged that their mission statements were *not* customer focused.

As discussed in the introduction, Southwest Airlines, noted in the service industry for its attention to the customer, has the following mission statement (3):

The mission of Southwest Airlines is dedication to the highest quality of Customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride and Company Spirit.

It is important to note that the mission statement does not discuss Southwest Airlines' desire to be number one in the airline industry, the need to maintain equipment for safe travel, maintain schedules, or keep costs low to increase value to shareholders. Each of these is indeed important to its business, but Southwest has instead focused on the customer as its reason for being.

In the public transportation industry, only two of the respondents that provided mission statements specifically mentioned the customer in their mission statements. The

Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) of Oakland, California, cites the following mission:

*To provide safe, clean, reliable, and **customer-friendly** regional public transit in order to increase mobility and accessibility, strengthen community and economic prosperity, and preserve the environment in the Bay Area.*

Similarly, the Capital District Transit Authority (CDTA) of Albany, New York, places the customer at the center of its mission statement:

*CDTA—Driven to Serve You—
To Transport Customers Safely and Reliably at
Reasonable Cost*

Both of these mission statements convey a message to the riding public, and other materials submitted by these agencies echo this customer focus. Most of the other mission statements, however, focus on issues such as

- Being an integral part of the metropolitan area.
- Providing safe, clean, efficient transit service.
- Contributing to regional mobility.
- Enhancing the quality of life.
- Delivering quality affordable transit services.
- Implementing transportation opportunities that enhance the community.
- Being the leading force in advancing public transportation.

Although these are all important issues facing public transportation systems, they may be less important to customers and may not keep employees focused on the customer. Several of the survey respondents have “values” or “strategic goals” that supplement the mission statement, which are considered to be the emphasis areas behind the mission statement. However, although the mission statements are usually more widely distributed, the values or strategic goals usually are not. Examples of the customer-focused values or goals include

- Metropolitan Transit Authority (New York City Transit, Long Island Rail Road, Long Island Bus, Metro-North)—All agencies have adopted a strategic business plan that has as its second goal (after safety) customer satisfaction. The MTA and all of the operators in the MTA family have identified specific strategies for improving customer satisfaction.
- Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA; Washington, D.C. area)—The second “Espoused Value” (after safety and security) is customer service

Our job is to move people, and we exist to serve our customers. Customer service drives our planning, decision making,

and use of resources. We listen to our customers and strive to be proactive in our pursuit of customer satisfaction. We commit to providing service that is safe, clean, reliable, courteous, and of excellent value.

- Miami Valley RTA (Dayton, Ohio)—Strategic approach to a customer-first organization (see Appendix D).

With our customer-first focus to exceed guest’s expectations, we pledge to provide a safe, dependable, and clean public transit system—delivered by a spirited, diverse workforce accountable to the people of our community.

Public Timetables and System Maps

Nearly every respondent that submitted supplemental materials included public route timetables and system maps. All of the materials provided important information, such as fares and schedules for the riding public. Several of the submittals contained additional information to target special groups, including tourists and new riders. Examples include

- Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA; Philadelphia)—Publishes a *Visitor Map and Transit Guide* that provides detailed information on SEPTA rail service from the Philadelphia International Airport and identifies specific Visitor Routes in the Center City that serve popular attractions. The Route 76 bus links the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Penn’s Landing, the New Jersey State Aquarium, and the Philadelphia Zoo. It is a detailed map with bus and rail route overlays on one side and easy-to-read, narrative descriptions of routes, frequencies, and fares on the reverse side.
- Metropolitan Transit Development Board (MTDB; San Diego, California)—Combines information for tourists and regular riders on a single, easy-to-use *Regional Transit Map*. This map details services, hours of operation, and fares for not only MTDB-operated service, but also for bus routes operated by neighboring public transportation operators, including the County Transit System, National City Transit, North County Transit District, San Diego Transit, and San Diego Trolley. A regional map with bus, train, and trolley route overlays is shown on one side, while a matrix listing each route by number and name, along with general hours of operation, fares, availability of bike racks, and service frequencies are shown on the reverse side. Colorful symbols are used to enhance the use of the route maps.
- Miami-Dade Transit (Miami, Florida)—Publishes a *Transit Rider’s Handbook* that includes a “Welcome from the Director,” a description of Metrobus, Metro-rail, and Metromover services, and information on fares and how to read the schedules. One particularly interesting point contained in this brochure regards

information centers and notes that more than 100 centers in Dade County stock transit publications and provide transit information. The transit information call center can provide information on the nearest locations.

- WMATA—WMATA's *Metro Guide to the Nation's Capital* lists more than 100 attractions and identifies the Metrorail and Metrobus routes serving these points of interest. The *Guide* also directs readers to its virtual Ride Guide on its website at www.metroopensdoors.com, which allows riders to enter their point of origin and destination. The Ride Guide then charts the course and fare for the rider.

Other Methods of General Interaction

One method of general interaction used by more and more heavy rail public transportation systems is the use of electronic scrolling signs or monitors on train platforms to provide real-time information on the location of vehicles and the expected arrival time at the stop or station. Most of the newer rail systems, such as BART and WMATA have installed the signs on train platforms. Other systems, such as the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), are currently installing the signs.

The advent of automated vehicle locator systems means that bus systems can keep passengers informed on a real-time basis. A number of bus systems do use real-time information in providing information to customers who call the telephone information center. It is expected that bus passengers will soon begin to see real-time schedule information at major transfer centers or transportation generators, such as large employers, shopping malls, and hospitals. Providing real-time information combines new technology with a customer focus.

Another method of using technology to provide information to customers is through the use of hand-held computers, cell phones, or similar devices with Internet capability. BART has recently initiated a feature that allows a customer to download an application from the BART website to their hand-held device in order to access and search timetables for BART rail lines.

Although real-time information and computerized schedules have been available to transportation personnel who staff control centers in most of the newer rail systems for the past 15 to 20 years, they have only recently been introduced to the customer and are areas where there are many opportunities for expansion.

OBTAINING AND USING CUSTOMER INPUT

Any successful service organization must have mechanisms for reaching customers, determining their needs, and

using this information to make improvements to service. The specific types of methods provided most often by respondents as examples of ways to obtain and use customer input in the public transportation industry were

- Rider satisfaction surveys and
- Focus groups.

Rider Satisfaction Surveys

Many respondents provided copies of surveys undertaken to obtain customer input as follows:

- Valley Transit (Phoenix, Arizona) conducted rider and nonrider surveys in 1999.
- BART conducts regular customer satisfaction studies (most recently in 2000).
- NYCT conducts annual citywide surveys of residents' perceptions of service. NYCT also conducts an annual telephone survey of 1,500 residents to determine customer attitudes and market share.
- CDTA conducts annual on-board rider information and satisfaction surveys.
- CTA conducts biennial customer satisfaction surveys (most recently in 2001).
- Regional Transportation District (Denver, Colorado) has a customer comment card available to riders, asking what the agency can do to make the rider's journey better. The card is in a self-mailer format with RTD's address (Director of Customer Services) and pre-paid postage.
- Transit Authority of River City (Louisville, Kentucky) conducts annual on-board surveys and focus groups to assess customer satisfaction.

The surveys generally solicit basic demographic information (i.e., age, race, income level, availability of automobile, etc.) from users and nonusers and ask customers to rate their experiences using the service. Most of the surveys submitted also examine trends to determine if customer satisfaction is improving or declining. An important result of the surveys is the identification of current concerns among riders that should be addressed by management including cleanliness of vehicles, availability and responsiveness of personnel, and personal safety.

Focus Groups

Some public transportation agencies use focus groups as a standard technique for obtaining more detailed information from customers than can be gathered through a telephone or on-board survey. The goal of a focus group is to gather a representative sample of customers to discuss issues. A facilitator who is trained to conduct these sessions and obtain

“honest” feedback usually leads the focus group discussion. Two agencies with interesting uses of focus groups are BART and Valley Transit.

- BART produced a training video for employees called “What Were They Thinking.” The video contains clips selected from more than a dozen hours of customer focus groups describing service satisfactions and complaints. The video was used to communicate customer satisfaction survey results with BART managers and front-line employees and complement the quantitative charts and graphs from BART’s 2000 Customer Satisfaction Survey. The customer focus group provided numerous positive comments and suggestions for improvement.
- Valley Transit used a transit route planning strategy during focus groups, called Consensus Driven Community Bus, to obtain and use customer input. The process uses brainstorming and sketch planning with Geographic Information Systems technology. Residents were encouraged to be public transportation planners, while Valley Transit staff served as facilitators and technical advisors. One result is that the community developed the routes for the Ahwatukee Neighborhood Circulator service. The description of the Consensus Driven Community Bus planning strategy appears to be quite innovative and one that will allow the users maximum input into the process. This strategy exemplifies the goal of obtaining and *using* customer input.

INVOLVING EMPLOYEES IN CUSTOMER-FOCUSED TRANSPORTATION

Employee involvement is usually the key to the success of any customer-focused public transportation system. Employees include all personnel associated with the public transportation system, from the chairperson of the board to the CEO to first-line operations personnel. The organization often must change its *culture* to effectively focus on the customer. Based on the supplemental materials provided, this appears to be the primary area where public transportation systems are implementing customer-focused programs.

Many respondents submitted materials on training programs that are customer focused; however, none submitted documentation of the involvement of the CEO in customer-focused programs. This is considered by the private sector to be an important component of customer-focused service. Many print and television advertisements come with a message from the company CEO. Some public transportation system CEOs have made periodic “meet the customer” visits; however, again no material was submitted that documented the approach used and that other public transportation systems could follow.

Some examples of agencies using innovative training programs include

- BART—Conducts station agent training, called “The Station Agent Professional,” the focus of which is Quality Customer Service. In this training, customer service is defined as follows:

Customer satisfaction is the focus of everything we do. We serve our customers by providing a safe, reliable, high quality, economical, and courteous transportation service. Whether we serve or support others within the BART organization or serve the customer directly we demonstrate our commitment to customer service by positive actions, which reflect understanding and responsiveness to our customer’s needs and expectations.

Training modules include effective verbal and non-verbal communications skills that are very customer friendly. This training requires the station agents to remember their own best and worst experiences as a customer and describes a customer service continuum, a progressive scale moving from behaviors that require less intervention to those requiring considerably more intense intervention for handling difficult people with empathy. Station agents are “Certified” upon completion of the training.

- MTDB—“Ambassador Orientation and Training” for operators. Training includes a 30-minute module (from a 6-hour course) on “Customer Service Principles.”
- WMATA—Conducts the training course “Stellar Customer Service,” a highly interactive program of 1 to 2 days in length on providing better customer service. This program is offered to both operations and nonoperations personnel.
- CTA—Offers “Transit Ambassador” training for management and operating personnel. The Canadian Urban Transit Association, which customizes this passenger relations program for each public transportation agency, developed this training program for the CTA. Separate versions of the course are developed for front-line operating personnel and management support. The purpose of the program is to improve overall customer service. Front-line employees receive four, 8-hour sessions, spaced 1 week apart. The “Fundamentals” of the course are designed to establish an employees credibility as a professional, take aim at the problem or situation, develop a positive relationship with passengers, provide “value added” service, and leave each situation on a positive note. The CTA started using this course approximately 10 years ago, felt it was useful the first time, and decided to have the course updated and taught again to reinforce positive behavior.
- National Transit Institute (NTI; New Brunswick, N.J.)—Public transportation agencies can take advantage of CD-ROM training developed by NTI and

called “The Professional.” As described in the 2002 *Catalog of NTI Training*, this course contains 3 hours of material and an instructor’s guide with suggested exercises to expand the program into an 8-hour class. The goal of this course is to encourage bus operators to make appropriate choices regarding how they provide service to customers. The customer module teaches operators to avoid problems with customers by treating them in the same manner as they would want to be treated. The course uses the acronym PRIDE to reinforce this concept: *Professionalism, Responsiveness, Informed, Dependable, and Empathy*.

The modular structure allows the material to be used as annual retraining, new operator training, or specific training in individual problem areas.

Although these programs are highlighted because of the supplemental materials provided, it is known that similar programs are in place in other agencies, including MARTA in Atlanta and NYCT in New York. Employee attitude is considered the key to customer satisfaction. Customers of businesses such as Southwest Airlines, Federal Express, and Nordstrom department stores consistently state that the reason they are loyal to these businesses is because of the outstanding service provided by the employees.

METHODS TO ACHIEVE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Many public transportation systems have implemented specific programs to achieve customer satisfaction and obtain customer loyalty. These programs often involve incentives for frequent ridership. Almost every public transportation system offers discounts for multi-ride passes.

Monthly passes usually reward those riders who use public transit to and from work, 5 days each week (40 trips per month). For example, if the base fare is \$1.00 each way and the monthly pass is \$25.00, the rider saves \$15.00 or gets 15 “free” trips.” This is a powerful incentive for frequent use. Examples of frequent rider discounts in public transportation offered by survey respondents include

- Spokane Transit (Spokane, Washington)—Spokane Transit’s base fare is \$0.75 and the agency offers the following monthly, unlimited ride passes: adults, \$25; youth (ages 6–18), \$19; City Ticket (includes parking and shuttle downtown), \$22; and VIP (seniors, disabled, Medicare cardholders), \$12.50.
- TRANSPO (South Bend, Indiana)—With a base fare of \$0.75, TRANSPO offers an adult monthly pass for \$30 and a student pass for \$25.
- TARC—TARC has a base fare of \$1.00 and offers “FareSaver Tickets” and “Monthly Pass.” The tickets are purchased in strips of 10 and cost only \$0.50 per ticket or \$5.00 per strip; the monthly pass costs \$23.00.

Customer-oriented Southwest Airlines has one of the best “frequent flyer” programs in the airline business. Free travel is awarded after as few as four round-trip flights and travelers can use the free travel vouchers on any flight that has full-fare seats available. Most other airlines limit the number of seats reserved for “award” travel.

Based on the materials provided, it is clear that a number of public transportation systems have implemented some customer-focused programs. The most frequently used methods are user surveys to obtain feedback from customers and employee training to involve employees.

CASE STUDIES OF TWO CUSTOMER-FOCUSED PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION AGENCIES

During this synthesis effort, a number of excellent examples of customer-focused strategies used by public transportation systems were identified and these are described in the previous chapter. Two of the agencies that participated in the survey [Dallas Area Rapid Transit (Dallas, Texas) and Miami Valley Regional Transit Authority (Dayton, Ohio)] were selected for a more detailed description because they employ a number of customer-focused strategies that could serve as models for other public transportation agencies.

DALLAS AREA RAPID TRANSIT (DART)

DART is a multi-modal, public transportation agency providing bus and rail transportation to a service area of 13 cities covering 700 square miles in the Dallas, Texas, metropolitan area. With an operating budget of \$245 million, DART operates 877 buses and 95 light-rail vehicles, providing nearly 60 million passenger trips annually. DART also provides Americans with Disabilities Act complementary paratransit service and is a partner with the Fort Worth Transportation Authority in Fort Worth, Texas, in the operation of commuter rail service, known as the Trinity Railway Express. DART has an extensive network of park-and-ride lot and satellite transfer facilities across the metropolitan area. The agency is aggressive in its competition with the single-occupancy automobile, offering many alternatives designed to increase ridership, thereby reducing congestion and pollution. DART has attracted a large number of “choice” riders and attributes its success, in part, to a customer-focus approach to providing service that starts at the top, with DART’s CEO establishing a priority for customer focus. Over the past few years, this focus has spread throughout the organization. DART’s vision is “To become THE benchmark public transportation agency in the country by consistently giving the highest quality service to our customers.” Using the major categories identified in the survey, the strategies employed by DART are described here.

- General Interaction with the Customer—DART spends approximately \$800,000 each year (0.3% of its operating budget) on efforts to provide information to the public. It employs every method of providing information to the customer identified in the survey, except for the use of automated information kiosks/ touch screens. The methods that DART identified as the most effective are

- Public timetables by route,
- Telephone information services,
- Information kiosks/bus stop signs,
- Information brochures, and
- Advertising (print media).

DART has an extensive website (<http://www.dart.org>) (Figure 18), with some bilingual features, which provides a great deal of information and interaction with the customer in the following categories:

- About DART,
- DART Services,
- DART News & Events,
- DART Publications,
- Riding DART, and
- DART Departments.

The public can take advantage of the information on the Internet to determine routes and fares, learn about new services, and inquire about job opportunities.

- Obtaining and Using Customer Input—DART spends approximately \$200,000 each year (0.08% of its operating budget) and uses all of the methods identified in the survey to obtain and use customer input. It rated the following methods as the most effective:
 - On-board surveys,
 - Employee meetings, and
 - Other.

An innovative method used by DART is that of a “customer panel,” a group of citizens and customers who evaluate the quality of service and recommend improvements. In addition, DART conducts customer focus groups on an ongoing basis for specific topics. Agency management also reviews customer input (complaints) on a regular basis to identify problems and resolve them quickly. As one of its most innovative initiatives, DART uses a performance indicator, called the Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI; see Appendix D), as one of the indicators measured and reported to officials and policy makers. The CSI uses three feedback mechanisms: the customer satisfaction survey, customer complaints, and a quality assessment of operating data. Although the first two measures are self-explanatory, the third measure relies on operational data such as safety, reliability, convenience, courtesy, and cleanliness to determine if



FIGURE 18 DART homepage.

DART is meeting what it considers to be “Critical Customer Expectations.”

DART considers customer input to be very important in agency decision making in the areas of routes, schedules, fares, and facilities. The agency uses extensive community outreach programs to gather input for long-term service planning.

- Involving Employees in Customer Focus—DART spends nearly \$3 million each year (1% of its operating budget) in efforts to involve and train employees to focus on the customer. This is the area where DART concentrates the most resources and effort to ensure that front-line employees and supervisors provide

quality customer service. It rates the following methods as most effective in involving employees:

- Message from department heads;
- Specific customer-focused training for operators, supervisors, and station attendants;
- Allowing employees to make customer service decisions; and
- Employee recognition (see Appendix D).

In an effort to improve employee morale, DART conducts employee surveys every 6 months. The results of the survey are used to develop training programs. The program developed for operating personnel that provides the most customer focus training is known as “The HEART of DART”: where HEART

stands for: *Hear the customer out, Empathize with the customer, Apologize to the customer, Respond to the customer, and Take ownership.*

HEART training modules include identifying the customer, improving communications through better listening skills, and more sensitive responses (see Appendix D).

DART also requires bus operators to participate in a refresher training course every 2 years, called JUMP START, for *Join Us to Move People and Start Talking About Review Training*. The program was named by an operator, who was rewarded for his suggestion. Supervisors also attend JUMP START training to ensure that they can relate to the drivers and their job responsibilities. Nearly a full day of the JUMP START training is devoted to customer service. Upon completion of the 2-day training program, each attendee receives a certificate and must successfully pass a driving test and a written test, which includes a focus on customer relations.

Another employee program sponsored by DART is the Excellence “Extra Mile” Award. The purpose of this program is to provide management with a vehicle to recognize employees who have performed above and beyond the normal scope of their work. There are currently three levels of Excellence Awards

- Platinum Award—\$200 gift certificate or 16 hours of paid leave.
- Gold Award—\$100 gift certificate or 8 hours of paid leave.
- Silver Award—\$50 gift certificate or 4 hours of paid leave.

DART is also considering further employee incentives for attendance and other performance measures.

- Achieving Customer Satisfaction—DART does not have a level of funding specified for this area. It identified frequent rider discounts as the only method currently used to achieve customer satisfaction. This is the method often used by customer-focused organizations to obtain customer loyalty. For example, airline passengers can qualify for free trips faster from Southwest Airlines than from any other airline, thereby encouraging frequent travelers to use the airline. Even grocery stores have issued and promoted discount cards for customers that are designed to encourage loyalty. DART’s basic adult fare is \$1 for each trip. It offers a \$30 unlimited ride monthly pass that saves the average rider traveling to and from work each day \$10 or 25% each month. More frequent riders can save even more. DART also heavily

markets and promotes the *Annual E-Pass: The Ultimate Employee Benefit*. Depending on the participating company location and profile, each E-Pass costs employers as little as \$49 per year and allows the employee to ride all bus and rail services, every day, all year long. These are indeed model programs for obtaining customer satisfaction and loyalty.

THE MIAMI VALLEY REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY (RTA)

The Miami Valley RTA provides nearly 13 million passenger trips each year in the Dayton, Ohio, area. With an operating budget of approximately \$50 million per year (one-fifth the size of DART), the RTA operates 40 routes serving Montgomery County, Wright Patterson Air Force Base, and Wright State University in Greene County. The RTA provides service 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The agency operates diesel buses, electric trolley buses, replica streetcars, paratransit vans, and trams. The RTA is committed to a “Customer-First Focus,” an effort that began in 1999 when it contracted with Wright State University to conduct a Customer Satisfaction Baseline Survey. The executive director has made a concerted effort to ensure that the actions of every RTA employee reflect the Customer-First Focus: “With our customer-first focus to exceed guests’ expectations, we pledge to provide a safe, dependable, and clean public transit system—delivered by a spirited, diverse workforce accountable to the people of our community.” (See Appendix E for “strategic” information.)

Using the major categories identified in the survey, the strategies employed by RTA are described here.

- General Interaction with the Customer—The RTA spends approximately \$200,000 each year on efforts to provide information to the public. It employs every method identified in the survey, except for the use of an automated telephone information service. The methods that the RTA identified as the most effective are
 - Transit system map,
 - Telephone information services,
 - Information brochures, and
 - Advertising (print media).

In 1999, the RTA published a Route & Day Care Map (Figure 19), which identifies over 300 day care centers located along bus routes and includes a guide to choosing childcare. The purpose of this information is to better serve bus riders, many of whom are working mothers who must drop off children at childcare on their way to work.

Another method of general interaction is the RTA website, which contains its “Customer First” focus



FIGURE 19 Miami Valley RTA Route & Day Care Map.

statement, and information on schedules, fares, and other services.

- **Obtaining and Using Customer Input**—The RTA estimates that it generally spends \$24,000 each year on activities related to obtaining and using customer input. The methods it currently uses are (1) complaints and (2) on-board surveys.

As previously discussed, the RTA adopted its customer-focused strategies following the completion in 1999 of the Customer Satisfaction Survey. The main focus of the survey was to identify those operational and service features that result in customer satisfaction. Although the survey design followed general industry standards, RTA personnel added a feature to the study that resulted in more information; not only did the survey instrument measure customer satisfaction for 25 operating and service features, it also assigned customer importance ratings to each item. This feature made it possible to target RTA's resources toward those features that are important to riders, but have relatively low satisfaction ratings. These factors may not be the most important to a rider, but the cross tabulation allowed the RTA to identify disparities between importance and satisfaction. The survey established "disconnect" scores, which are statistically valid at the 0.001 level. The disconnect score is the difference between the *importance* score and the *satisfaction* score. The larger the disconnect score, the more the agency has to improve to satisfy customers. Although the factors most important to customers were "operator driving the bus safely and well" and "safety on the bus," the survey showed that customers were relatively satisfied with the RTA performance in these areas; that is, there was not a large disconnect between the importance rating and the satisfaction rating. However, the

areas of greatest disconnect and the corresponding scores were

- Adequacy of weather protection at bus stops (1.02),
- Buses running on-time (0.75),
- Buses running often enough (0.69),
- Availability of seats and benches at bus stops (0.67),
- Cleanliness of bus stops (0.66), and
- Safety at bus stops (0.65).

This analysis showed that to retain existing customers, the RTA needed to devote more attention to bus stops, because four of the top six disconnect scores are related to bus stops. This issue might not have been discovered in a normal survey, because bus stops did not score as high as bus safety or on-time performance in importance.

- **Involving Employees in Customer Focus**—The RTA devotes a portion of its new employee and refresher training to passenger relations and customer-focus training for operators and telephone operators in the RTA information center. The agency did not rate the training as highly effective, however, noting that inconsistent support from the operators and a lack of support from the labor union to discipline habitual offenders were obstacles faced in implementing customer-focus programs. The RTA does have monthly meetings of the Operators Information Group and schedulers and planners to discuss and implement operator-suggested changes and to improve communications.
- **Achieving Customer Satisfaction**—The RTA identified the following as the methods it uses to achieve customer satisfaction:
 - Frequent rider discounts,
 - Bikes on buses program, and
 - Employee pass marketing.

During summer months, bicycles and their riders are carried free of charge. This is an excellent way to introduce riders to the public transportation service who may not normally ride the bus. This type of program could encourage such individuals to eventually ride the RTA on a regular basis. Although the base adult fare is \$1 each way, the RTA offers a \$25 unlimited ride monthly pass, which saves the twice-a-day work rider \$15 or 38% each month. More frequent riders can save even more. Employee pass marketing is handled through each employer, and state employees can get passes through a tax-exempt payroll deduction.

ISSUES IN CUSTOMER-FOCUSED PROGRAMS IN THE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRY

In the survey, public transportation agencies were requested to comment on the following issues related to customer-focused programs:

- Describe any obstacles faced/overcome in attempting to involve employees in customer-focused transportation,
- Comment on the most important reason for implementing customer-focused strategies, and
- Comment on whether public transportation system funding should be based in part on performance.

OBSTACLES FACED/OVERCOME

Several public transportation agencies described the obstacles they faced in attempting to involve employees in customer-focused transportation, including

- Lack of resources/funding,
- Union opposition,
- Indifferent employee attitudes,
- Lack of CEO involvement,
- Inadequate staffing,
- Lack of pay for performance system, and
- Rapid growth/lack of time.

By far, the major obstacle reported by public transportation agencies involves the lack of resources/funding. Many of these agencies could not quantify a budget for activities associated with involving employees in customer-focused public transportation and others reported a small or minimal budget for such activities. Several respondents reported that union opposition and/or indifferent employee attitudes limit positive employee involvement. One agency reported that long-time employees view management efforts to involve employees as just the latest management scheme, which will be out of favor in a year or two before the next manager arrives. For them, it is a “been there, done that” attitude.

In those instances where agencies reported a lack of funding as the obstacle and then commented on overcoming the obstacles, most reported that “being creative,” providing in-house training, and using nonmonetary incentives were ways to overcome the lack of local funding. When agencies cited union opposition/indifferent attitudes as obstacles, top management involvement and improving labor/

management communications and relations were cited as ways to overcome the obstacle.

IMPORTANT REASONS FOR IMPLEMENTING CUSTOMER-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

Figure 20 summarizes the results of the question asking agencies what was the most important reason for implementing customer-focused strategies. More than 50% (18) of the respondents stated that the most important reason was increased customer satisfaction, followed by increased ridership (12).

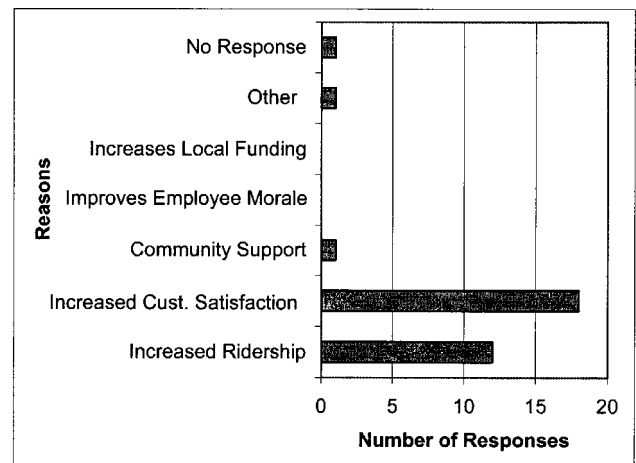


FIGURE 20 Most important reason for implementing customer-focused strategies.

As previously discussed, customer focus begins with general interaction with the customer. The technique most frequently used is the system of maps and route timetables. Respondents and researchers noted that timetables and route maps in the public transportation industry are not very “user-friendly.” Despite efforts to make the route maps easy to understand, many transit professionals who visit other cities cannot easily determine which route or direction will get them to their destination. It was suggested that agencies could focus on improving the customer service offered by the telephone information centers operated by most transit systems. These agents (who may be the first contact a new rider has with a public transportation agency) should receive intensive customer-focused training. Such training is conducted in a few transit systems, but currently customer-focused training appears to be

primarily directed at bus and train operators and station agents.

FUNDING BASED ON PERFORMANCE MEASURES/ RIDERSHIP

Figure 21 shows the results of the question asking agencies whether public transportation system funding should be based in part on performance measures; for example, on-time performance, levels of customer satisfaction, or ridership. A majority of the agencies surveyed (19) do not believe that funding should be based in part on performance measures. In these instances, they cite several reasons.

- Factors contributing to performance are outside of the agency’s control,
- Factors are difficult to measure/quantify,
- Passengers should not be penalized for poor management, and
- Level of satisfaction with public services is tied to the overall economic health of the service area.

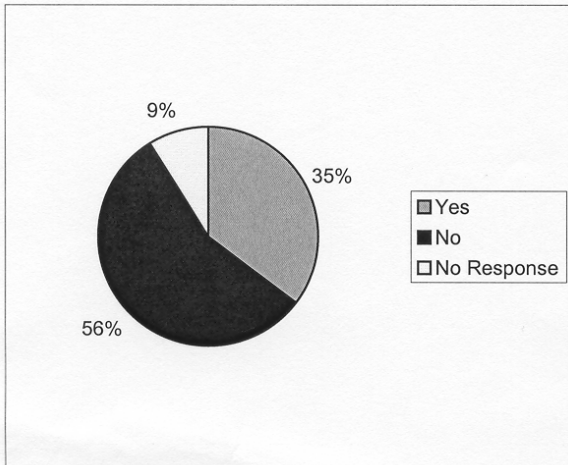


FIGURE 21 Should transit funding be based in part on performance measures?

In several instances, agencies opposed to funding levels being based on performance measures stated that passenger revenues reflect an agency’s performance. Exemplary performance would result in passenger revenue increases, whereas poor performance would result in riders using the system less often. Some agencies suggested that employee compensation and incentives are the appropriate way to improve performance.

More than one-third of the agencies (12) believe that funding should be based in part on performance measures, whereas many others commented that some portion of the funding should be based on performance. Interestingly, only one agency reported that its funding level (a general fund subsidy) was based in part on ridership (see Figure 22).

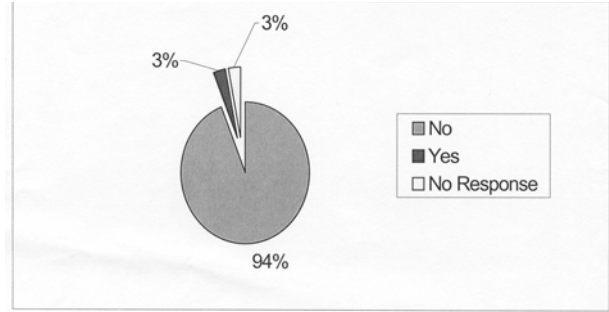


FIGURE 22 Is transit funding currently tied to ridership levels?

The concept of providing funding based on performance measures could provide strong incentives for increasing customer-focused programs. This concept was introduced in the 1990s during the federal government’s initiative to “reinvent government,” by making all publicly funded agencies more accountable to the public. Although the majority of agencies responding to the survey do not favor funding based on performance measures, there is some support among stakeholders such as transit users, policy makers, and academics who have studied the transit industry. For example, Brian Taylor, a Professor of Planning at the University of California at Los Angeles, has studied the structure of transit funding and subsidy and has concluded that current funding formulas/criteria are not synchronized with the goal of customer satisfaction. According to Professor Taylor, “Pressure for geographic equity in funding tends to hinder use of performance-based formulas” (5).

OTHER ISSUES—THE FUTURE OF CUSTOMER-FOCUSED TRANSPORTATION

During the literature review and the review of materials submitted by respondents, it became apparent that the public transportation industry is just beginning to employ Internet- and computer-based methodologies to enhance customer-focused programs. The Internet is increasingly used to introduce and entice “choice” riders to transit. Furthermore, the capabilities to provide “real-time” information, by means of desktop or hand-held computers or cellular phones, on when the next bus or train will pass a time point is a powerful marketing tool. In examining public transportation information currently available on the Internet, very little was available that demonstrated a commitment to customer service. By contrast, Southwest Airlines makes its entire Customer Service Commitment available through its website (3). The document is approximately 20 pages long and contains the mission statement and specific policies relating to safety, delays and cancellations, fares, reservations, refunds, etc. The policies describe how the customer service commitment is implemented for almost every circumstance a traveler will encounter. This allows the passenger to be informed and have expectations that are consistent with policy.

This synthesis represents an important first step in examining customer-focused strategies that are effective in increasing public transportation ridership and satisfaction. More detailed analysis is necessary to understand the “best practices” associated with customer-focused strategies. Additional research is necessary to determine which customer-focused programs have the greatest impact on increased public transportation ridership and customer satisfaction. Furthermore,

there should be research on new and innovative customer-focused strategies by examining other industries and the use of technology. The results of the synthesis revealed that the public transportation industry uses relatively few specific methods to achieve customer satisfaction (e.g., frequent rider discounts and guaranteed ride home). Additional research is needed to provide the industry with cost-effective methods to achieve customer satisfaction.

CONCLUSIONS

This synthesis documents the experiences of public transportation agencies that are considered to be innovative in implementing customer-focused programs. Based on the survey results for this report, with respect to successful methodologies to employ to implement a customer-focused program, they include the following:

- For general interaction between the customer and the public transportation system
 - Telephone information services (high use and effectiveness),
 - Advertising in print media and radio/television (high use),
 - Web-based information (high use),
 - Transit system map (high effectiveness), and
 - Timetables by route (high effectiveness).
- For obtaining and using customer input
 - Complaints (high use and effectiveness),
 - On-board surveys (high use and effectiveness),
 - Employee meetings (high use), and
 - Telephone surveys (high effectiveness).
- For involving employees in customer-focused public transportation
 - Message from chief executive officer (high use and effectiveness);
 - Message from department heads (high use and effectiveness);
 - Training for operators, supervisors, and station agents (high effectiveness);
 - Events to build morale (high effectiveness); and
 - Allowing customers to make customer-focused service decisions (high effectiveness).
- For achieving customer satisfaction
 - Frequent rider discounts (high effectiveness) and
 - Frequent rider benefits (high effectiveness).

Based on these responses, public transportation agencies should consider focusing additional resources on the following strategies that were rated as highly effective, but not highly used:

- Transit system map,
- Timetables by route,
- Telephone surveys,
- Allowing customers to make customer-focused service decisions,

- Frequent rider discounts, and
- Frequent rider benefits.

The majority of the public transportation agencies responding to the survey have mission statements, but only two of these mission statements specifically mention the “customer.” The majority of the mission statements mention safety, which is of course important; however, consideration should also be given to specifically stating a commitment to providing a high level of customer service. Southwest Airlines notes in its Customer Service Commitment, “We tell our Employees we are in the Customer Service business—we just happen to provide airline transportation.” Such a statement gives a clear signal of the corporate priority.

There are several specific examples of customer-focused methodologies that appear promising and they are highlighted in Chapters 3 and 4. The use of technology is becoming prevalent in the public transportation industry and it holds the most promise for future customer-focused methodologies. The large majority of the responding agencies have websites and although most do not present a commitment to customer service, this is an easy and inexpensive way to begin to convey this message to the public. Already, several agencies are using real-time information on the location of vehicles. Currently, at least one agency is doing a demonstration that allows cell phone users with Internet access to obtain next-vehicle real time at specific stops. These are all opportunities for more widespread use of technology.

Although several obstacles were reported in implementing customer-focused activities, the most common was the lack of resources/funding. This also suggests that the industry has not yet strongly committed itself to the customer.

As previously discussed, this synthesis is only the initial step in creating customer-focused public transportation. More detailed analysis and research is necessary to understand the “best practices” associated with customer-focused strategies and to determine which customer-focused programs have the greatest impact on increased public transportation ridership and customer satisfaction.

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