



NEWS

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MTA HOSTS INAUGURAL NATIONAL CUSTOMER FIRST CONFERENCE DESIGNED TO BOOST CUSTOMER SATISFACTION, ATTRACT NEW RIDERS

The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) today kicked off the first ever national Customer First Conference geared toward the public transit industry and designed to highlight the importance of placing customer service and satisfaction as top priorities for the industry. Presentations were delivered by some of the country's top customer service experts who offered ideas designed to boost customer service and attract new customers.

"This is a golden opportunity for the MTA and transit officials nationwide to share the best methods developed by the private sector," said MTA Board Chairman Larry Zarian. "Participants can take the lessons they've learned at this conference to help make their transit systems more customer friendly, convenient and profitable."

The two-day conference, held at MTA headquarters and the Omni Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, featured presentations by Stephen R. Covey, author of the national best seller "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," Richard Whiteley, president of the Forum Corporation and author of "The Customer-Driven Company," Robert Spector, co-author of "The Nordstrom Way," and Paul Skoutelas, executive director and CEO of LYNX, the public transit system in Central Florida.

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In addition, top officials from Saturn Corporation, Southwest Airlines, Disney University Professional Development Programs and several mass transit agencies presented their companies' proven customer service strategies. Innovative break-out sessions focused on a variety of issues, including using the Internet to reach customers, marketing transit to customers, the effective use of surveys and applying effective customer service strategies in the public sector.

With its new emphasis on customer service, the MTA used the conference as an opportunity to sharpen its marketing and customer service know-how to retain its current passenger base and to attract a new generation of transit customers.

"The MTA decided to host the conference to improve its training programs for front-line customer service employees. We believe the money invested in this conference will go a long way toward improving the agency's overall bus service for the public," said Linda Bohlinger, MTA Interim CEO. "We've also invited our colleagues in the public transit industry to benefit from this conference. By exchanging information, the MTA will benefit by learning about other successful customer service programs used around the country."

In addition to the conference, the MTA has initiated a variety of new programs under the *Customer First* program, an extensive effort launched in 1996 to focus transit resources on MTA services designed to better serve the transit-riding public. Some of the new MTA programs include "Talking Buses," in which buses on specific lines will be equipped with a recorded voice which announces upcoming bus stops and provides safety messages. In December, the MTA reduced the price of monthly transportation passes to \$42 and, for the first time, offered a specially priced weekly pass for \$11 and a semi-monthly pass for \$21.

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In an effort to make passengers feel safe and comfortable while waiting for the bus, the MTA launched an ambitious program to clean each of the 18,000 bus stops in Los Angeles County used by Metro buses., even though historically this service has not been the MTA's responsibility. The Bus Stop Cleaning Program includes four six-member crews who pull up weeds, remove trash and clean sidewalks.

The *Customer First* campaign also incorporates the ideas of MTA staff, many of whom use public transportation or come in contact with transit customers everyday, and who responded to an employee suggestion campaign which generated 100 simple, common sense ideas to improve bus service. Among the suggestions: provide customer comment cards on each bus, create a book containing bus routes and maps, and offer customer information on the Internet.

The MTA operates approximately 1750 buses which carry about one million boarding passengers each weekday. Weekday ridership on the MTA's combined 48 miles of light rail and subway has reached the 100,000 mark.

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