

Customer Service At the MTA

When discussing customer service with MTA staff, the focus is on activities which take place in the Customer Service Centers rather than a broad view of customer service. This activity is centered on customer call handling at the two Customer Service Information Centers. The Ticket Booth located at Shelter A, Deaderick at 5th Avenue and the Clement Landport located at 1011 Demonbreun.

The customer service offices at the Clement Landport are open Monday through Friday from 6:30 am until 5:30 PM. Call Center hours are Monday through Friday from 6:30 am until 6:00 PM and Saturday from 8:00 am until 12:00 PM (9:00 am until 6:00 PM during Trolley season (April to December). The facility and telephone information Call Center is closed on Sundays and all major holidays. Those customers who call for information after business hours, or on a Sunday or holiday, are instructed by a recording to call back during normal business hours.

The center at the Clement Landport has 9 employees:

- A Director of Customer Service
- A Lead Customer Service Representative
- 6 Customer Service Representatives
- A Schedule Rack Stock Clerk

MTA sometimes adds temporary staff at peak seasons to handle increased call volumes.

Activities at the Clement Landport are focused on five activities:

- Customer Service
- Information
- Ticket Sales
- Picture ID's
- Bus Transit Center

Call Center Telephone System

The MTA Call Center's telephone system is managed by ACD Call software. The computer system that the software is loaded on is an independent system and is not networked to any of the other computer systems that are located at the facility. The ACD Call system has a 20-minute power backup. After 20 minutes without power, data will be lost. As may be expected, data loss due to extended power outages

does occur on occasion. With continued power, ACD Call will store two months of data. After two months, the system purges itself. At present, the data is not archived before being purged.

The ACD Call system was purchased at the time the Clement Landport was built and the Customer Service Department was moved there (approximately 3 years ago). The software package purchased was a basic system. Upgrades (for example, Caller ID) do exist, but none have been purchased and installed to date.

The ACD Call system distributes and counts all calls that are made to the Call Center. Incoming calls are automatically routed to the first open line, and the Customer Service Representative manning that line takes the call. There are a total of six telephone lines. Customer Service Representatives are trained to answer the call on the first ring. If all lines are busy, the caller will hear a recording and will be put on hold until a line becomes available. All overflow calls are routed to one specific line located in the Landport ticket booth. During direct observation of operations in the ticket booth, this overflow line received 10 calls over the course of 30 minutes, and were handled readily by the booth attendant in the midst of her other duties.

The existing telephone system for the call-in system has eight telephones that use six telephone lines. Each line is assigned to a particular type of call (for example, information or a complaint). Each different telephone number is provided to the public. There is also a general information line if a customer is unsure which telephone number to select.

As a Customer Service Representative answers a call, the telephone display shows a code, telling the representative what line the person called in on. For example, "MTA" is displayed for information, and "Complaint" is displayed for a call that came in on the complaint line.

ACD call tracks the total number of answered, lost, abandoned, and overflow calls. A lost or abandoned call is one that was hung-up after hearing the initial recording. This could mean that the customer waited on hold too long and hung-up or that the call was a wrong number. An overflow call is a call that is not answered within a pre-set amount of time. These calls are re-cycled back into the system. In addition to counting calls, the computer system tracks the number of seconds that a lost/abandoned call waited on hold after hearing the recording before the call was lost or abandoned.

The ACD call system has the capacity to print out a daily report listing the number of answered, lost, abandoned, and overflow calls. The output from this daily report is used to create monthly Customer Service Activity Reports that are presented to the Board. A sample of this monthly report is presented on Table 15-1.

**Table 15-1
Customer Calls Report
October 2000**

Phone Calls				Average Wait
Week	Answered	Lost	Overflow	Time (Seconds)
1	1,676	191	77	331
2	1,839	96	61	216
3	1,954	129	37	270
4	1,540	46	48	182
Total	7,009	462	224	999

The present ACD call system does not separate abandoned calls by line. Therefore, the Call Center staff must manually dis-aggregate calls to individual lines so that they may tie this performance measure to individuals. The system also does not have call recording capabilities, which staff members feel could be useful for training.

Call Taking

Each day, four to five Customer Service Representatives work one of several shifts to cover the entire workday. Shifts overlap during the busier parts of the day. Due to low unemployment and competition for persons seeking employment in the Nashville area, it has been difficult for MTA to keep the Customer Service Department fully staffed, resulting in a consistently under staffed situation. Due to a Customer Service Representative vacancy, a light duty operator is currently providing part-time telephone support. This vacancy is the post for a Spanish-English bilingual operator, and has been hard to fill.

To ensure the accuracy of the information that is provided to callers, each Customer Service Representative candidate must complete a three-week training program during which they learn MTA scheduling, service, and operational details. They are also provided the opportunity to ride the buses to learn how the system operates. The three-week training is part of a six-month probationary period.

Call answering procedures are currently governed by a short training guide and the MTA Customer Service Center Employee Telephone Training Handbook. This handbook outlines how to answer calls, place a caller on hold, return to a caller on hold, mail schedules, and telephone manners. It also summarizes what customers expect when they call, who benefits from excellent customer relations, and how to improve your attitude towards your customers.

As service changes are made, the MTA Scheduler provides materials or training (sometimes both) to the Customer Service Department and its representatives detailing the upcoming changes. In addition to formal training, each week the Director of Customer Service or the Lead Customer Service Supervisor monitors approximately two calls answered by each Customer Service Representative. A form is filled

out detailing the quality of the representative's demeanor, attitude, initiative, and information provided. The calls that are monitored serve as the basis for identifying needed training and bi-annual performance reviews.

On average, approximately 300 calls are made each day to the Customer Service Call Center. The busiest days for calls are in August, when school starts, and in the winter on snow days. According to the Customer Service Department staff, very few calls (1% or less) are for service requests, and around 4% of calls are complaints. A review of the monthly of call data presented at the November Board meeting shows that the number of complaints were less than 1% of calls (446 of 61,706 calls answered between January and October 2000).

The bulk of calls made to the Call Center are bus service information requests. Information is maintained on the local area, bus stop locations, how to ride the buses, schedules, fares, accessible routes, magnet school routes, ID cards, passes, construction detours, kiosk information, parking fees at facilities with parking, and field trips.

Customer Service Representatives manually look up the requested information for each caller. All information is kept in hard copy in a binder that is maintained by each Customer Service Representative. The MTA has no automated or computer system that maintains the vast array of information that the Customer Service Representatives must have at hand. Brochures and schedules are mailed to customers upon request.

According to Customer Service Department staff, the number of calls to the Call Center has been on the rise due to city growth, school transportation services, awareness of services, and more aggressive marketing. Historical data prior to mid-January 2000 was not available (the first three weeks of call data for January were lost). Table 15-2 presents call volume since February 2000.

Table 15-2
Average Monthly
Call Volume: Feb – Oct 2000

Month	Calls Received
Feb	5,987
Mar	6,275
Apr	6,627
May	7,043
Jun	7,114
Jul	7,008
Aug	9,691
Sept	7,509
Oct	7,471
Average	7,192

The flurry of calls in August is attributed to annual opening of the school year

Tracking of Comments and Complaints Tracking

Currently all service requests, comments and complaints are tracked manually on paper. However, a networked computer software program for this process is currently under development and is expected to be operational before the end of the year. This new, networked system will allow anyone at MTA to review the status and outcome of any request, comment, or complaint.

According to the Customer Service Department staff, when a complaint call is received, the Customer Service Representative fills out an MTA Complaint Record form. A copy of this form is forwarded to Operations, Maintenance, or other appropriate functional area depending upon the nature of the issue. The issue is then investigated.

Responses and return calls are made by the department assigned to investigate the problem. The complaints that are received through the Call Center are usually about service timeliness, buses not stopping to pick-up patrons, operators not accepting transfers (transfers expire after 30 minutes or the time of the next connecting bus), driver discourtesy, or bus cleanliness. In these instances, complaints are forwarded to Operations or to Maintenance.

The Customer Service Department staff described the normal process as follows:

- When a service change or service comment is received, the Customer Service Representative fills out a Service Change Request form.
- A copy of the form is forwarded to Operations or Scheduling depending upon the nature of the request. Responses and return calls are made by the person assigned to investigation.

If appropriate, small system adjustments are made quickly. If a change would result in additional expense, it is sent to the Board for consideration.

Comments and complaints are also taken through MTA's new website. These comments and complaints are initially received by the Director of Customer Service. The Director fills out the necessary forms and distributes copies as appropriate for follow-up.

Other Customer Service Center Activities

In addition to taking telephone calls for information and receiving service complaints and comments, the Customer Service Department at the Clement Landport is responsible for several other activities.

- **Ticket and Pass Sales** - The Customer Service Department staff sells bus tickets and passes, and also is responsible for issuing tickets to the downtown ticket booth. The Department maintains records of all sales for accounting purposes and is responsible for the deposit of all sales receipts. In addition to selling MTA passes and tickets, the Customer Service Department also sells Regional Transit Authority (RTA) passes. Sales activity reports are prepared monthly for both the downtown ticket center and the Clement landport.
- **Picture ID's** - The Customer Service Department staff is responsible for processing and fulfilling all requests for student and ACCESSRIDE ID's. Two separate software driven ID-making units are used to produce the ID's.
- **Field Trips** - MTA offers \$0.25 fares for school field trips. The Call Center takes these calls and fills out the paperwork.
- **Ride Matching** - For half of each day, the MTA Call Center receives calls for Rideshare information. The other half of the day, these calls are answered by the Rideshare Office staff. Forms are filled out by the Customer Service Representative and are passed on to Rideshare Associate. This frees time for the ride share staff to work on other issues.
- **Vanpool Program** - Once a vanpool has been set up and is operational, the Customer Service Department is responsible for tracking mileage, maintenance, and accidents.
- **Provide And Compile Information For MTA Publications** – The staff members are often called upon to provide and compile data for printed material such as the trolley brochure, student guide, flashes/notices, service changes, surveys, and the Transit Guide (essentially, materials for existing services). They also provide data for website updates and data for updates to signage

displaying schedule information and distribute printed materials such as the Transit Guide, brochures, and public schedules.

- **Monthly Customer Service Surveys** - The Customer Service Department is responsible for carrying out and collecting data for a monthly customer service survey that becomes part of the board report.
- **Facility and Parking Administration** - the Customer Service Department staff handles all activities related to facility maintenance and parking administration at the Clement Landport, including the update of electronic sign information.
- **Lost and Found** - Items that are lost by MTA customers are brought to the Clement Landport after being logged in by dispatch. They are kept at the Landport for several weeks before being donated or discarded if no one claims them.
- **Travel Training** - In the past, Customer Service staff has been asked to provide bus service information and support at malls, festivals, fairs, and job fairs. Because of staff shortages and other duties, this has not been done recently.

Customer Service Goals

Fast response is expected on complaints and service requests/comments. The goal is for complaints to be handled within one day, although many require two to three days. Very serious complaints are responded to immediately by an appropriate department official. The goal for response to service requests is two to three days. Each person is responsible for tracking his or her own response time. No formal reports are currently produced documenting response times or outcomes.

The Customer Service staff does track the number of complaints received against its official goal of no more than 50 complaints per month (not including ACCESSRIDE complaints, which are tracked separately by ACCESSRIDE. How this goal was arrived at is unclear. However, from January through October of this year 446 complaints were received. This is 11% below the number of "allowable" complaints for the 10-month period.

MTA has recently begun to tie Call Center performance to each Customer Service Representative. During a representative's performance review, goals for calls answered are set (around 95 percent). A bonus program for those representatives exceeding their goal has also been established. Weekly reports including the number of calls taken and the length of those calls are kept for each Customer Service Representative. If goals cannot be achieved, the Customer Service Department will consider additional training or adding staff.

Monthly reports for the Call Center as a whole are also maintained. The information contained in the monthly reports is the data that has historically been requested by the Executive Director. The monthly data do not appear to be tracked against any goals, and it is unclear whether there any formal departmental goals other than that described above for individual Customer Service Representatives and for the maximum number of complaints per month.

Performing further analysis with the monthly data that has been presented to the Board (exhibit 15-1), it can be demonstrated that, on average:

- The call center achieved 93% calls answered for the period January – October 2000.
- Call center volume is increasing.
- The trend is for an increase in the number of calls lost/abandoned.
- That the trend is toward a decrease in overflow calls.
- That the trend is toward a decrease in average wait time for lost/abandoned calls.

This could mean that callers are waiting a shorter amount of time on hold or that callers are hanging up earlier. Data to make that determination is not currently available.

Other Customer Service Related Goals

The Customer Service Department maintains data regarding the number of calls received, calls answered, calls lost and abandoned, calls put into overflow, and the number of complaints received each month. Although not maintained by Customer Service or directly generated out of customer service activities, other customer service metrics and goals have been established.

These goals are viewed as operational statistics, not directly related to customer service as it is perceived by MTA (essentially, the Customer Service Department activities at the Clement Landport). However, these goals are customer service related in that they reflect the level of service and the quality of service received by patrons. These goals and the data reflecting achievement of these goals are reported to the Board each month:

- waiting list for Access Ride
- on-time performance
- miles between road calls
- preventable accidents.

Conclusions

For the MTA, the term “customer service” applies principally to the activities of the Customer Service Department, most especially the activities of the Call Center. For many transit agencies, the customer

service function is an integral part of total transit operations. Providing quality information is viewed as a subset of providing quality service.

The Call Center works at an acceptable level, but its improvement depends on making some changes in its method of operations:

- The MTA is losing potentially valuable data by not archiving the ACD call data that is now purged after 90 days.
- The MTA loses some level of efficiency by not upgrading its ACD system to include such features as caller ID, aggregation of calls by line, etc.
- Maintaining the staff at authorized levels, particularly the bilingual operator opening.
- Updating the old procedures manual for use as a training and SOP for operators.
- The MTA has no automated data for route and schedule information.

The call center data are not tracked in a manner that would enable their use for service planning and evaluation.

The rate of calls to the call center has increased over 20% in 2000.

The complaint handling process has a number of shortcomings that reduce its effectiveness as a management tool.

- Complaints are investigated by the department which is responsible for the problem
- Contact between the complainant and the MTA is through the cognizant department
- There is no process for reporting to customer service the disposition of a complaint or a request

Call statistics suggest that the number of calls is increasing and the effectiveness of the call center staff is improving.

Recommendations

The MTA should adopt a broader view of the Customer Service function to include many of the operational aspects of the business currently managed outside of the Customer Service Department. This would include both the provision of information and the provision of actual transit services. MTA's new Transit Guide defines safety, reliability, customer friendliness, and efficiency. These definitions should serve as the basis for the development of appropriate goals and measurement tools for each area. Some of these measurements are already reported (for example, on-time performance, miles between road calls, and preventable accidents). However, these statistics are presently not joined together into a comprehensive picture of MTA customer service.

MTA's mission is "To provide safe, reliable, efficient, customer friendly public transit and alternatives to driving alone." Customer service metrics should be re-defined to measure the degree to which this mission and related goals are being met.

MTA should also ensure that its Call Center is adequately staffed. Additionally, MTA should evaluate the current hardware and software employed in the Service centers to determine if it is adequate for the current and future requirements. Certain enhancements would provide operational efficiency inside the call centers e.g., call aggregation to identify abandoned calls by line automatically (rather than manually), and may well by quick payback investments. As part of our review of the Information Systems function we recommended consultant study of the IT infrastructure. The customer service center hardware and software requirements should be incorporated into this study.

Customer service data collection and measurement should be delegated to appropriate staff members throughout the organization. Achievements versus targets can be presented and publicized on such periodic intervals as MTA determines is appropriate (for example, monthly or quarterly). Standards for service (e.g., call handling statistics – abandoned calls, wait times, etc.) should be established objectively, monitored and regularly reported.

For all services (existing and new, service oriented or information oriented) and for any service changes MTA should clearly define the goals and objectives of the service or change, such as the new service standards being developed by the short range transit consultant. They should identify appropriate measurement tools to gauge the success of the service or change. Baseline data should be gathered, and follow-up data should be gathered at defined intervals after implementation. Analyzing the data and comparing it to the defined goals will allow MTA to determine the success of a service or change and to determine if adjustments are necessary.

Costs Estimate

None.