

Customer Service Related Activities

Three customer service related activities were special subjects for review during this audit:

- How the MTA obtains regular customer input
- How the MTA deals with non-english speaking customers
- How the MTA deals with special customer surveys.

1.) Obtaining Regular Customer Input

In addition to the small, targeted market research efforts described in the previous section, MTA receives customer input through various means, such as public hearings, user committees, the MTA website, and at regular monthly Board meetings.

Public Hearings

MTA conducts service changes twice each year, as well as less formal hearings as a part of Board meetings for less significant service changes. Federal requirements state that transit agencies must hold public hearings for major service changes. MTA receives public comments on the proposed changes at these public hearings. Formal public hearings are held at several locations in the Nashville area on varied days and at varied times. The meetings are publicized through flyers on buses, newspaper advertisements, radio announcements, and on the website.

User and Community Committees

Interviews with MTA staff identified two user committees: Tying Nashville Together, and the Access Rider User Group.

Tying Nashville Together (TNT) meets with MTA staff monthly and with the Mayor of Nashville quarterly. This group brought customer service issues and complaints to the MTA Board. Today the group works directly with MTA to improve service, with the Executive Director having the most contact with the group. TNT's transit program is a part of its much larger set of community service issues.

Recent areas of discussion between TNT and MTA have included issues related to bus stop sign changes and the limited number of bus benches and shelters. In the past, the TNT group has been responsible for suggesting things such tools as the Transit Guide and has worked with MTA to develop and/or speed the development of other services to meet the needs of the community.

The Access Ride Policy Advisory Committee works directly with Access Ride staff to address issues and improve services for the handicapped community.

Outreach Programs

Marketing campaigns such as Clean Air Month and Try Transit detailed earlier in this document frequently include targeted or general outreach programs. In addition, through on-site visits, direct mail, and door-to-door campaigns the Rideshare Associate continually works with local employers and employees to inform them of transportation options such as vanpooling, the Mobility Check program, and local and commuter bus services that may meet their transportation needs. Somewhat less frequently, the Rideshare Associate and Customer Service staff members are asked to conduct outreach for the general public to inform customers of new or improved transit services.

MTA has recently added a Community Outreach Coordinator position to assist with the growing outreach opportunities. This new position is fully funded through a grant. The Coordinator will call on local businesses and agencies such as the Dell Corporation and the Corps of Engineers, public schools, and neighborhood and other local groups. The Coordinator will attend fairs and other local events to assess community needs and identify ways to meet those needs now and in the future.

Other Public Input Options

Other options for regular public input include MTA's new website and monthly Board meetings.

The MTA website has been operational for 6 months. It provides a forum for customers with Internet access to submit their comments and questions electronically.

An opportunity is provided at each Board meeting to receive public comment on issues on the agenda or about other general issues and concerns.

Conclusions

For a transit agency of its size (approximately 150 vehicles, serving a population of over half a million) MTA provides a good variety of avenues for regular customer input. Opportunities for customers to comment are offered periodically at transit events and through public hearings and customer surveys. Continual opportunity to provide input is provided through MTA's website and through the Customer Service Center Call Center.

As discussed later in this section regarding *Recent Surveys*, documentation of survey results is limited and it is difficult to determine specifically what and how data and public commentary is used.

Recommendations

As MTA grows and increases its role in transit advocacy, it will need additional methods to solicit information from customers. This may be accomplished through:

- Appointed customer committees, advisory committees, or panels with periodically rotating membership and regular meetings with the transit agency
- Public planning meetings where MTA jointly develops services and programs with its customers
- Neighborhood or area meetings where the MTA discusses plans for service in specific neighborhoods or service areas
- Regularly scheduled targeted outreach efforts to provide information and receive input from groups such as seniors, persons with disabilities, students, non-English speakers, etc.
- Surveys such as the boarding and alighting and origin and destination surveys described earlier in this document

The new Community Outreach Coordinator should lead these efforts as a part of an enlarged planning and marketing program for the MTA.

2.) Addressing The Needs Of Non-English Speaking Customers

As the diversity of the Nashville area grows, addressing the needs on non-English speaking customers will become increasingly important.

MTA has not conducted any extensive studies to identify or quantify the non-English speaking populations of Nashville. Rather, these populations have been informally identified through discussions with the Customer Service Department and the contracted marketing agency. At present, Spanish-speakers are considered the largest non-English speaking population in the region, although many other non-English speakers are also present in the Metro region.

The efforts undertaken by MTA to address the needs of non-English speaking populations include:

- The MTA is trying to fill the open Customer Service Representative position with another Spanish-speaker (to replace the one Spanish speaker who left). MTA will also provide Spanish versions of its schedules to customers upon request. MTA has worked with Tying Nashville Together (TNT), operators, passengers, supervisors and others, to identify and understand the needs of the growing Hispanic population of users.
- A TDY machine for hearing-impaired customers is located at the Customer Service Call Center

- MTA has chosen to use an on-demand internet translation program to allow customers with internet access the option of viewing their Website in multiple languages (Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, and Italian)

- Visually Impaired - Available to all MTA customers, the downtown talking post that provides schedule information is especially useful to those with visual impairments. MTA will also provide Braille versions of its schedules on request.

Conclusions

MTA has conducted little formal research to identify the nature and extent of its non-English speaking market populations. However, according to the 1990 US census, English is spoken at home by 89 percent of the Nashville urbanized area's population. Although numerous languages were reported, Spanish is the second most spoken language spoken at home in the urbanized area's population. MTA's recent anecdotal evidence seems to support the notion that the Spanish-speaking population is a growing major population that may, along with other non-English language speakers, require specialized communication tools.

Recommendations

MTA should continue its efforts to provide services (for example, a Spanish-speaking Customer Service Representative, translation of informational materials, schedules, guides, and system maps) for the non-English speaking population. MTA should also conduct a review of updated data about the languages spoken in its service area (including tourist traffic) as soon as new data is made available (for example, 2000 Census data). Much of this data probably already exists among various groups in the region including sections of the Metropolitan Government. Additionally, the new outreach coordinator should develop a relationship with the agencies, non-profit, and faith-based organizations in the area that work with new immigrant populations to identify other non-English speaking constituencies as they emerge.

3.) Recent Surveys and Their Outcomes

Recent surveys have included the Titans Shuttle Survey, the Try Transit Survey, the Midtown Connector Survey, and the Zone Survey. In most of the surveys discussed below we were unable to view a comprehensive set of survey results.

Titans Shuttle Survey

Titans shuttle riders were asked a series of questions pertaining to their commuting habits, transit service use, what media sources they generally see (radio, newspaper, and television), and what else the MTA should be doing more of (choices included late night bus service, light rail service, commuter rail service,

better express services, and other). MTA representatives state that improvements made after the survey included fare changes, changes in pick-up/drop-off points, and changes in elderly transportation.

Try Transit Survey

As a part of the Try Transit program, eight targeted groups were asked to answer the questions about types of services they would like to see more of in the future. Choices included late night bus service, light rail service, commuter rail service, better express services, or other services. In lieu of a detailed report, a brochure presenting an overview of Try Transit survey results and services that were in development by MTA (Night Owl late night services, enhanced express bus services, a Transit Guide, new system map, and commuter rail status) was created and distributed to the public.

Midtown Connector Survey

In conjunction with the Midtown Connector Community Outreach program, MTA received 88 completed surveys from persons within the South sector of the Midtown Connector service area. It is not known how specific questions were selected. However, four questions were asked and survey results were analyzed.

Zone Survey

Following the reintroduction the Zone service, Zone users were asked to complete a survey, asking about commuting habits, how often and why they use "Zone" service, what media sources they generally see (radio, newspaper, and television), ways that MTA can make Zone service better, and what more MTA should be doing.

Monthly Customer Service Survey

Each month a Customer Service Representative or a light duty operator is asked to conduct a survey of bus patrons. The goal for each month is 50 completed surveys. The routes and locations where the survey will be conducted are selected each month by the Director of Customer Service based on recent route changes, complaints, or at the request of the Scheduler.

The predecessor to the current Director of Operations, who was heavily involved in marketing functions, developed this monthly survey. The utility of the information gathered through this survey is the reason it continues today. Open-ended comments from the form are forwarded to appropriate departments to be addressed, and survey results are compiled into a monthly report. Examples of the types of commentary from these surveys includes:

1. Line up should be 5 minutes apart
2. Every once in a while there is a "cruel" driver, but for the most part the service is satisfactory
3. Your drivers are super. They get an A+
4. Service is very reliable

5. No improvements are needed
6. Need more frequent service
7. We need more outbound trips on 10th Avenue south
8. Increase bus service in all areas and add more late night service.

Conclusions

MTA generally conducts a number of small, targeted surveys each year. These “spot check” surveys do not generate statistically valid data. However, the data and public comments that are gathered are referred to and considered by MTA as new services are developed and as existing services are updated.

Quantified documentation of survey results is extremely limited, and it is difficult to determine specifically what data and public commentary has been used. Rather, it seems that MTA staff’s perception of the data is used to shape the direction of future operational decisions. In addition, anecdotal information says that survey results have been used to speed up programs that are already in the works or being considered.

With the exception of the monthly customer service survey, MTA’s surveys tend to focus on evaluation of services after they are first implemented. Efforts to research demographics, travel patterns, market demand and pricing elasticity are extremely limited. These topics are also discussed in the *Marketing* section of this report.

Recommendations

MTA should develop and periodically update a comprehensive set of statistically valid planning data, working with the MPO and the RTA. This data would serve as a marketing and planning tool that can provide a broader understanding of the service area’s demographic make up, travel patterns, and transportation needs.

Development of the data sets can be accomplished through the completion of demographic analyses, boarding and alighting surveys, origin and destination surveys, and other types of customer surveys. Most transit agencies complete boarding and alighting and origin and destination surveys only once every few years (generally every five years). This data should be consistent from year to year so trends over time can be monitored. Studies can be completed in-house or under contract to an experienced outside agency or firm. Data can also be collected at varying levels - by route, day of week, time of day, block, etc.

The MTA should tabulate and report on the ad hoc surveys that have been completed in recent months to assure that the results of these surveys are available for planners and other decision makers in the future.

The implementation of such surveys should be part of the work assigned to the expanded marketing and planning staffs.

Overall Cost Implications

None.