

# ***Mixed Signals:***



## ***An Assessment of the MTA's Handling of Customer Inquiries Received Via Mail, Phone, and Web***

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	5
Customer Communications Departments	6
Long Island Rail Road	6
Metro-North	7
New York City Transit	7
New Jersey Transit	8
Telephone Information Units	9
Long Island Rail Road	9
Metro-North	10
New York City Transit	11
New Jersey Transit	12
Correspondence Units	13
Long Island Rail Road	13
Metro-North	13
New York City Transit	14
New Jersey Transit	14
Synopsis of Telephone and Correspondence Units	15
Telephone and Correspondence Unit Surveys	17
Telephone Information Unit Survey	17
Correspondence Unit Survey	17
Synopsis of Telephone and Correspondence Unit Surveys	19
New Interactive Technologies	20
Agency Websites and E-mail	20
The MTA	20
London Transport	21
New Jersey Transit	22
Virginia Railway Express	22
Real-Time System Status Technologies	23
<i>iTravel</i> Initiative	23
Interactive Kiosks	24
SmartRoute/SmarTraveler High-Volume Automated Phone Systems	24
Automatic Vehicle Location Systems	25

Synopsis of New Interactive Technologies	25
Conclusions and Recommendations	27
Recommendations to the MTA	27
Recommendations to the MTA Agencies	28
Appendix A: Websites of Referenced Agencies	A-1

**List of Tables**

Table 1: Telephone Wait Goals (Versus Average Waiting Time) for MTA Transit Agencies, in Seconds	15
Table 2: Correspondence Turnaround Goals (Versus Percentage of Correspondence Volume Meeting Goal) for MTA Agencies	15
Table 3: Hold Wait Times and Adequacy of Information from Survey of MTA Agency Telephone Units	17
Table 4: Turnaround Times and Adequacy of Responses from Survey of MTA Correspondence Units, for Letters	18
Table 5: Turnaround Times and Adequacy of Responses from Survey of MTA Correspondence Units, for Comment Cards	19

The Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee and its Councils are the legislatively mandated representatives of the ridership of the MTA. Our 38 volunteer members are users of the MTA transit system and are appointed by the Governor upon the recommendation of county executives and, in New York City, the Mayor, Public Advocate, and Borough Presidents. For more information on the PCAC, please visit our website: [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org).

## **Executive Summary**

The operating agencies of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority - the Long Island Rail Road, Metro-North Railroad, and New York City Transit - together comprise the largest transit network in North America. On a daily basis, these agencies must be prepared to respond to requests regarding complex fare, route, and schedule information from a pool of seven million riders. Adequate provision of travel information is of prime importance in maintaining a healthy ridership. However, the MTA has no unified customer communications policy. Instead, each agency sets its own policy in this area.

To assess the MTA's overall provision of customer information in today's climate of burgeoning ridership, the PCAC undertook a study of the communications departments at each agency. In particular, comprehensive information was gathered on MTA agency telephone and correspondence units and on the provision of information over the Internet via the MTA website. For purposes of comparison, supplementary information was also collected from other transit providers including New Jersey Transit and London Transport.

In addition, several travel-information inquiries were made of the MTA agency telephone and correspondence units in a non-randomized survey to verify whether data provided by the agencies on hold times, response times, and quality control bore out in practice.

### **Findings**

None of the MTA agency customer communication departments maintains a formal, well-defined mission statement to guide its policy and activities. By contrast, NJ Transit maintains a formal statement and refers to it in policy decisions. Similar to recent efforts at Metro-North, the NJ Transit statement establishes the customer as the central element of all policy decisions. However, all MTA agencies do perform regular market research efforts to gauge the effectiveness of and help to improve customer communications policies and procedures.

In general, wide variation was found in the goals set for telephone waiting times and correspondence turnaround times among the MTA agencies. Although the commuter rail agencies, Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) and Metro-North, are similarly sized, the telephone waiting time goal at the LIRR is 90 seconds, far longer than the 20-second goal at Metro-North. Even so, on average Metro-North meets its goal while LIRR does not.

Similarly, the correspondence turnaround goal at NYC Transit is 21 days. Although this goal is met on average, it is still more than twice as long as the turnaround times set at the commuter rail agencies - in particular Metro-North, which, although a smaller agency, receives about 75 percent of the volume of correspondence reported by NYC Transit. In fact, Metro-North is the only agency meeting its telephone wait and correspondence turnaround goals.

Wide variation in telephone wait and correspondence turnaround times was also experienced in the PCAC's telephone and correspondence unit survey. For example, for telephone inquiries made on the same weekday, a call to Metro-North was answered immediately, a call to LIRR resulted in a 14 minute wait on hold, and four consecutive calls to NYC Transit received busy signals. As well, none of the telephone representatives of any of the MTA agencies supplied information on service diversions until prompted by the caller and, in one case, the information given was contradicted by information given on the MTA website.

In terms of correspondence, one service inquiry and one information request were mailed to each agency. Adequate and timely responses were received from the commuter rail agencies. However, it took NYC Transit 36 business days to respond to the information request. Further, NYC Transit never responded to the service inquiry, even after a second mailing.

Customer comment cards, distributed by LIRR and Metro-North, were also sent as part of the correspondence survey. Timely responses were received from Metro-North. However, the LIRR did not respond to an initial set of comment-card inquiries, and never responded to an inquiry written in Spanish on one of the railroad's own Spanish-language cards.

The MTA website, although recently updated to better integrate the provision of travel information among the agencies, also suffers from variations in the provision of this information. For example, schedule and fare information is provided in a distinct and different manner for each of the MTA agencies, making it confusing for customers to plan transit trips which involve the services of more than one agency. The website also has a cumbersome Internet address ([www.mta.nyc.ny.us](http://www.mta.nyc.ny.us)).

Further, the MTA prohibits the LIRR, Metro-North, and NYC Transit from corresponding with customers via e-mail or other electronic means, for fear of the volume of e-mail inquiries which might be received and the staffing costs involved in responding to them. However, several other transit agencies do accept customer e-mails, and identify the costs of implementing Internet-based communication as unavoidable as more and more people take for granted electronic communications with service providers of all types.

For its part, the MTA notes that greatly improved integration of travel information will result from the *iTravel* project. *iTravel* is an upcoming, federally funded demonstration project which will provide a single telephone and website source for real-time travel information from all transit providers in the New York metropolitan area. However, the *iTravel* telephone and website information units will not replace the customer communications departments at the MTA agencies, and the MTA has not specified whether and for what types of information customers might be directed to *iTravel* sources.

Finally, at the agency level, NYC Transit is exploring automatic vehicle location systems for its bus and subway networks. These systems - Automatic Vehicle Location and

Control (AVLC) for buses and the Automatic Train Supervision (ATS) and Communications Based Train Control (CBTC) programs for subways - will provide real-time system status data which potentially can be tied-in to telephone and Internet-based customer information units.

### **Recommendations**

Although the PCAC recognizes that the MTA agencies spend a great deal of time and effort working to improve customer communications practices, from our findings, we have identified several areas deserving special attention.

#### Recommendations to the **MTA**:

- The MTA should establish a **formal, unified customer-communications policy** to better coordinate policy and information-sharing among the agencies.
- In keeping with the industry standard, the MTA should **immediately allow customers to communicate with the agencies via e-mail** and adjust staff levels and responsibilities accordingly. E-mail usage will only continue to grow as a preferred method of communication and the MTA needs to meet this demand or risk failing the needs of its customers.
- The MTA should **better integrate the provision of travel information on the MTA website**. Route, fare, and schedule information should be provided in the same manner for all MTA agencies, and should facilitate the planning of trips involving more than one agency's transit services.
- The MTA should **register a shorter, less-cumbersome website domain name**. A shorter Internet domain address, such as mta.gov or nymta.gov, would be easier for the MTA to promote in customer literature and easier for customers to use.
- The MTA should specify the information it intends to share with the *iTravel* regional travel-information demonstration program, including information for which customers will be directed to *iTravel* sources instead of MTA sources. The MTA should also **refrain from overreliance on iTravel services**, to the detriment of the continued improvement and expansion of MTA agency customer communications departments and the MTA website.

#### Recommendations to the **MTA agencies**:

- All MTA agency customer communications departments should **maintain a formal, clear, and detailed mission statement**, reflecting a strong customer-service orientation and focussed on the informational needs specific to each agency's riders, to guide departmental policy and activities.

- The LIRR and Metro-North telephone information units should have the **ability to seamlessly transfer calls** to any other MTA transit agency requested by a customer, without the need for a customer to hang up and redial.
- The LIRR should work to **reduce its waiting time for telephone inquiries** which, at 90 seconds, is far longer than the goal of 20 seconds maintained by its sister commuter rail agency, Metro-North.
- The LIRR should ensure that **all customer comment cards receive answers**, including Spanish-language cards, and should offer customers the option of **written responses**.
- NYC Transit should **reduce its turnaround goal for written responses** to correspondence which, at 21 days, is more than twice as long as the turnaround goal set by LIRR and Metro-North.
- NYC Transit should ensure that the **Automatic Vehicle Location and Control (AVLC)** program for buses and the **Automatic Train Supervision (ATS) and Communications Based Train Control (CBTC)** programs for subways be brought to fruition systemwide. Although these programs were primarily devised to improve service, data from the programs can and should be integrated with customer-communications technologies to improve the provision of real-time travel information via the telephone and the Internet, and, eventually, at subway stations and bus stops.

## Introduction

The operating agencies of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority - the Long Island Rail Road, Metro-North Railroad, and New York City Transit - comprise the largest transit network in North America. At all times, these agencies must be prepared to respond to inquiries regarding complex fare, route, and schedule information from a pool of seven million daily riders. Adequate provision of travel information is of prime importance in maintaining a healthy ridership. However, the MTA has no unified customer communications policy. Instead, each agency sets its own policy in this area.

To assess the adequacy of the MTA's overall provision of customer information in today's climate of burgeoning ridership, the PCAC undertook a study of the communications departments at each agency. In particular, comprehensive information was gathered through correspondence and interviews with MTA agency officials regarding the structure and performance of the telephone and correspondence units at each agency, including the capacity of the units, goals for timely responses to customers, and future plans. Information was also requested regarding the provision of information over the Internet via the MTA website. Further, for purposes of comparison, supplementary information was collected from other transit providers including New Jersey Transit, London Transport, and Virginia Railway Express.

In addition, several travel-information inquiries were made of the MTA agency telephone and correspondence units as part of a non-randomized survey to see whether data provided by the agencies on hold times, response times, and quality control bore out in practice, from the customer's perspective.

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, the PCAC seeks to assess the current state of customer communications at the MTA agencies, in reference to each other and to the transit industry in general, to identify both best practices and problem areas. Second, the PCAC seeks to make recommendations for improvements to the reliability and usefulness of MTA-wide customer communications practices.

Tables related to performance and survey data are supplied in the body of the paper. Copies of all survey correspondence are available upon request. The Internet addresses for the websites of referenced agencies are listed in Appendix A.

## **Customer Communications Departments**

Customer communications departments at public transportation agencies, like front line employees, have an important responsibility to riders. Accurate, timely communications can make the difference between confusion and frustration or satisfaction with the services provided by transportation agencies. This is especially true in a region with a complex and extensive transit system like New York.

An important aspect of customer communications is the way in which direct customer inquiries are handled. Such inquiries can deal with a wide variety of subject matter, from simple schedule and fare questions to the reporting of problems. In order to respond to these direct inquiries promptly and accurately, customer communication units are developed to receive and answer questions. These units are established with the objectives of meeting existing and/or projected inquiry volumes and creating customer loyalty through good service. The traditional units for handling customer inquiries are the correspondence unit and the telephone information unit. In addition, computer based units are a developing medium of communications for answering inquiries. All of these units typically reside in one larger customer communications department, which deals with both direct inquiries and general external communications projects.

In this section, the customer communications departments of the LIRR, Metro-North, NYC Transit, and New Jersey Transit (NJ Transit) are briefly introduced. Departmental responsibilities, mission statements, procedures, outreach and research are discussed.

Mission statements help to foster the corporate cultures of communications departments. Well-defined goals and objectives focus departmental staff on the efficacy of their work. Each of the MTA agencies and NJ Transit have separate and different missions, goals, and objectives for their respective customer communications departments. It is important to discuss the differences in aims and structure because they illustrate the different operating ideologies of the departments.

Proper outreach keeps customers informed about where to turn for information. Supplying prompt and accurate information will only benefit riders if they know where to find the information. Follow-up market research helps agencies understand how customers feel about the communications they receive. Cross-research into other agencies' communications departments designs and goals can be used to help improve internal practices.

Subsequent sections examine the individual information units, including planned improvements, in greater detail.

### **Long Island Rail Road**

The LIRR Customer Communications Department is responsible for answering all written correspondence and telephone inquiries, as well as coordinating customer information campaigns, including weekly and monthly publications. None of the MTA

agency customer communications departments maintains a formal mission statement. However, informally the LIRR Customer Communications Department holds as its mission to serve as a customer advocate and answer correspondence and inquiries in a timely and accurate fashion.

The department advertises contact phone numbers and addresses on all LIRR timetables, in phonebooks, in promotional advertising, and on the MTA website and distributes comment cards<sup>1</sup> in stations. The department also performs market research and examines customer feedback in developing its goals, as well as researching the experience of other agencies.

### **Metro-North**

In 1997, Metro-North unified its customer communications and customer services departments. Metro-North consolidated these departments in order to better coordinate communications efforts and improve the quality of information provided to customers. Focus was also shifted from quantity to quality of responses provided by the agency. The responsibilities of the new Customer Services Department are wider responsibilities than those of the other MTA transit agencies, encompassing the telephone and correspondence units, the public address system program, a service quality inspection group, timetable production, and the lost and found and parcel rooms.

The department's informal mission is to provide a level of service which helps maintain current customers and attract new customers. Specifically, the department is charged with obtaining input from customers which helps the railroad to develop and enhance the quality of public communications, train service and station environments, employee professionalism, and various other service-related policies. Targeted employee training and resource allocation and structured follow-ups to customer issues are used to further these goals.

The department advertises its contact information in the same places as the LIRR: on timetables; in phonebooks; on promotional advertising; on the MTA website; and on customer comment cards. The department also conducts market research to understand riders' needs and looks to the experience of other public transit agencies.

### **New York City Transit**

In 1999, NYC Transit consolidated its former customer services department and technology division into a unified Department of MetroCard Operations. The new department includes a customer assistance division housing the correspondence and telephone information units and a customer information division responsible for marketing. The customer assistance division handles all telephone center operations, the majority of NYC Transit's telephone and written contact with customers, and the resolution of all MetroCard and reduced-fare related issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Comment cards are postcards distributed to customers by LIRR and Metro-North for the submission of questions and comments.

The informal mission of the division is to provide accurate travel and related information in a courteous and prompt fashion. Similar to the other MTA transit agencies, the division examines the experiences of other transit agencies to help set benchmarks for productivity, establish goals for correspondence turnaround and telephone wait times, and streamline organizational structure.

The division advertises its customer contact information on brochures, maps, and subway car and bus cards, on the MTA website, and in local phonebooks. The division is also considering advertising on non-MTA-related websites.

### **New Jersey Transit**

The Customer Service Department at NJ Transit responds to all customer complaints, inquiries, and comments received over the phone and by mail. However, unlike the MTA agencies, NJ Transit's Customer Service Department also accepts and responds to e-mail inquiries.

Also in contrast to the MTA agencies, NJ Transit's Customer Service Department has a formal, well-defined mission statement, as follows:

The mission of the Customer Service Office is to enhance the loyalty of existing customers, attract new customers, and provide useful information to management about customer comments, recommendations, complaints, and commendations. The strategy for accomplishing these goals is to provide our customers with personal service that is courteous, efficient, and helpful. We should provide the highest service in our industry and offer service for NJ Transit's customers that is on par with other service companies of comparable reputation.

We want our customers, who have contacted Customer Service with a genuine need or problem to feel satisfied as a result of their contact with the company. We want them to tell others about how pleased they are about the way they were treated.<sup>2</sup>

The department refers to this statement to guide both daily activities and policy decisions.

Contact information for the department is advertised on timetables, on the agency's website, on station notices, in phonebooks, and on all marketing materials. As with all of the above agencies, the department conducts market research and studies the experiences of customer service departments at other transit providers.

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<sup>2</sup> NJ Transit Customer Service Department Objectives and Goals Mission Statement. (November 1999)

## Telephone Information Units

This section provides an overview of the telephone information systems of the LIRR, Metro-North, NYC Transit, and NJ Transit. Discussion includes volume and handling of calls, supervision of operators, and achievement in meeting performance goals, as well as details of recent and planned innovations.

Each of the four agencies must be able to handle a high volume of calls as well as provide service information during a disruption. In order to better accomplish these tasks, all four agencies use computerized telephone answering systems. These systems depend primarily on input provided by callers through touch-tone telephone keypads. Callers without touch-tone service are routed directly to information agents, who are available 24 hours except at NJ Transit.

### Long Island Rail Road

LIRR telephone information unit staff includes a manager, a computer systems administrator, four union supervisors, and 20 full-time information representatives. Three local phone numbers are offered, one for each of the railroad's three service areas: New York City; Nassau County; and Suffolk County. A maximum of 100 calls can be attended to at one time.

Callers have access to three levels of information: an initial automated greeting; automated schedule and fare information; and information requested directly from a representative. Incoming calls automatically receive a recorded greeting which identifies the railroad and, during unplanned disruptions, includes service updates. This ability to provide real-time disruption information assists in call management. Experience has shown that many riders will listen to the disruption message and hang up without needing to proceed further and draw on the resources of an information representative.

After the initial greeting, callers are prompted to select between the automated information system or the services of an information representative. The automated system provides schedule and fare information based upon origin, destination, and time-of-travel information provided by customers through a touch-tone telephone keypad. Callers can also select to listen to a recorded version of *Keeping Track*, the railroad's regular customer newsletter. If a rider is unable to get the desired information, the option is given to hold to speak to a representative.

Information representatives are trained to answer inquiries about fares, schedules, trip-planning, disruptions, service changes, promotions, accessibility, and station information. Representatives will also provide phone numbers of connecting services, such as NYC Transit. During periods of high volume, the railroad can add representatives via overtime. Performance and information accuracy is monitored by a manager and union supervisors both on the spot and via call recordings.

Progress of the unit is measured by the total number of calls received per day, which, based on mid-1999 data, is 13,134. On average, most calls are schedule related (70%), followed in descending order by fare inquiries (20%), and inquiries regarding specials and packages (10%). However, during the summer, the proportion of inquiries regarding specials and packages can reach 40 percent.

The average length of each call is 71.3 seconds. The goal for the wait between the initial greeting message and connection with a live operator is 90 seconds, and is not met. As of mid-1999, the average waiting time was 124.3 seconds. Further, according to customer-service officials at the railroad's sister agency, Metro-North, the industry standard waiting time is a much shorter 60 seconds.

The recent incorporation of a telephone switchboard and other new technology initiatives may help reduce waiting time. The switchboard, installed in 1997, allows for better integration of information representatives, the automated telephone information center, and a pilot voice-recognition, or Integrated Voice Response (IVR), system. This new computerized system, which will eventually replace the current automated system, allows customers to make inquiries using spoken key words, bypassing their telephone keypads. If the IVR is unable to supply an answer, callers will still have the option of waiting to speak with a representative. A bilingual (English-Spanish) IVR is also planned.

### **Metro-North**

The Metro-North telephone unit employs 15 full-time customer service representatives and two part-time representatives, scheduled in staggered shifts in order to meet the normal peak calling periods. Managers reserve the authority to request overtime work from representatives during periods of high call volume. Two information numbers are offered: a toll-free number for calls outside of New York City; and a local number for calls from within the five boroughs. An automated call distributor handles 96 lines, split evenly between calls from within and outside of New York City. Similar to the LIRR telephone system, callers to Metro-North hear an initial greeting and are subsequently asked to select between an automated schedule and fare system or a customer services representative.

As at LIRR, the initial greeting allows the railroad to quickly provide disruption information and service updates. In 1999, Metro-North relied upon this capacity during two major weather emergencies which interrupted service, including a flash flood in July which disrupted the New Haven Line and an autumn tropical storm which disrupted all railroad service for several days. In both instances, the railroad notes that the initial greeting allowed it to handle a much larger volume of calls than would otherwise have been possible.

Customer service representatives are trained to answer inquiries about fares, trip-planning, schedules, service changes and updates, accessibility information, stations, and service disruptions. Initial training last for two weeks, with on-going coaching every 90 days. Calls are recorded, both to monitor accuracy and to be used for coaching

purposes. The department measures its progress through raw call volume, customer satisfaction surveys, and a customer complaint index.

The unit generally receives between 8,300 and 8,800 calls a day. On average, one-fifth of these calls require operator assistance, the rest being handled by the automated system. The maximum number of calls that can be attended to at the same time is 96. According to the Customer Services Department, few customers receive busy signals. Most representative-assisted calls (75%) are discretionary trip inquiries involving schedules and fares. The remaining 25 percent are made up of first-time rider inquiries.<sup>3</sup> Average call lengths are 105 seconds with representative assistance and 135 seconds via the automated system. The waiting time goal to speak with a representative is 20 seconds and is currently met. This goal is 40 seconds shorter than the industry-average wait time. As at the LIRR, representatives do not have the ability to transfer calls to a different MTA agency. However, they do give out the numbers of other operating agencies, as requested.

Recently, Metro-North opened a computerized Customer Services Center in the Graybar Building next to Grand Central Terminal, the hub of its services. This new center serves as a central office to which Metro-North customers can address questions, complaints, and issues, either by phone or in person. Customers who visit the office have the opportunity to meet with "advocates" who will walk them through the railroad's policies and procedures. Computerization has also given telephone representatives access to automated travel-information and inquiry-tracking systems, including access to system maps and station diagrams, as well as the ability to transfer calls to other Metro-North extensions, all of which should serve to streamline call management.

### **New York City Transit**

The NYC Transit telephone unit is staffed with 60 full-time information agents. Oversight is provided by a ten-person operations management and supervision unit, a five-person quality control unit, a scheduling manager, and an overall director. The unit can handle a maximum of 42 calls simultaneously. During periods of high volume, additional information agents can be added. One local phone number is offered.

Callers are immediately prompted to select between an automated information system and an information agent. The automated system offers several initial options, including system-status information, express bus schedules, MetroCard and fare information, and information on special events.

Information agents are trained to answer inquiries about fares, trip-planning, schedules, planned and unplanned service disruptions, and accessibility information for people with disabilities. All calls are recorded for purposes of quality control, and the quality-control unit also makes random test calls. Call volume and breakdown is tracked and reported regularly, and agents' work is periodically graded via "report cards".

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike the other agencies referenced in this report, Metro-North records call types and waiting times separately for its automated-system and representative-assisted calls.

The unit receives an average of 8,000 calls per day. Of these calls, 85 percent are generally itinerary inquiries, with the remaining calls split more-or-less evenly between schedule inquiries, system inquiries, and other non-categorized inquiries. Average call length is 140 seconds. The waiting time goal is 93 seconds. As of September 1999, this goal was not being met. At that time, the year-to-date cumulative waiting time average was reported to be 102 seconds.

Unlike the commuter railroads, the NYC Transit telephone unit does have the ability to transfer calls to Metro-North and Long Island Rail Road, as necessary. The unit was also early to avail itself of advanced communications technology. In 1991, an automated information system was installed, followed by a state-of-the-art call distributor in 1997. Due to increasing call volumes, the automated system was expanded to its current 42-line capacity in 1999. NYC Transit is also testing a new itinerary planning software system that will give telephone operators more rapid access to regional travel information.

### **New Jersey Transit**

In contrast to the MTA agencies, NJ Transit operates two separate telephone units, for northern and southern New Jersey. Neither unit is operated 24 hours. The North Jersey office is open from 6:00 a.m. to midnight; the South Jersey office is open from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. However, call handling is similar for both units. Like the MTA agencies, callers are initially given the option of using an automated-system system or speaking to a live operator. General schedule and fare information is available via the automated system and the system can provide regular service updates during disruptions.

Together, the units employ 91 operators, of which 71 are full time. Operators are trained to answer inquiries about fares, trip-planning, schedules, planned and unplanned service disruptions, stations, and accessibility. Calls are monitored randomly for accuracy by unit supervisors. Progress is measured via overall call volume figures and the proportion of calls which are abandoned by the caller.

Daily call volume ranges between 9,000 and 12,000 calls. Average call length is 110 seconds. The waiting time goal is 45 seconds, and is met 70 percent of the time. Like the MTA commuter railroads, NJ Transit operators do not have the ability to transfer calls outside of their own agencies. However, improvements to the telephone information system have begun to be implemented, similar to efforts at Metro-North, including an automated call distributor for phone inquiries and computerized information handling systems.

## Correspondence Units

In this section, correspondence units of the LIRR, Metro-North, NYC Transit, and NJ Transit are discussed, including staffing, volume, and achievement in meeting performance goals.

### **Long Island Rail Road**

The LIRR correspondence unit employs five managers to handle correspondence, supervised by a director and assistant director. The railroad's Director of Corporate Communications also reviews all correspondence to ensure that questions are answered completely and accurately.

The unit receives an average of 185 letters per month, divided between schedule, fare, and itinerary inquiries, complaints, commendations, and general comments received from customers and public officials.<sup>4</sup> The unit also answers letters addressed to the MTA Chairman, LIRR President, and Governor's Office that are related to the LIRR, as well as misaddressed correspondence intended for other agencies. In the event of misaddressed correspondence, the unit will forward the letter to the appropriate agency and inform the original sender. For misaddressed correspondence destined for another LIRR department, the unit will follow-up internally to ensure a response.

In addition to traditional correspondence, the unit also receives a similar volume of customer comment cards. However, response to comment cards is made only upon customer request and is solely by telephone.

The turnaround goal for correspondence is 15 days, and was met 88 percent of the time as of Fall 1999. Progress of correspondence and responses is measured with a computerized tracking system which reports on the achievement of the turnaround goal. The turnaround goal for comment cards is seven days, however no information was available from the railroad regarding the achievement of this goal.

### **Metro-North Railroad**

Metro-North's correspondence unit employs four representatives to handle all customer comments and complaints. Similar to the LIRR, all responses are reviewed for content by the Director of Customer Services.

Correspondence volume averages 290 letters per month, including customer reports (the railroad's version of customer comment cards). General categories of correspondence include schedule, fare, and itinerary inquiries, complaints, commendations, and other non-categorized topics.<sup>5</sup> As at the LIRR, the unit also answers letters addressed to the MTA Chairman, Metro-North President, and Governor's Office that are related to Metro-North, and will forward misaddressed letters to the appropriate agency. In some cases, the railroad will also ask the new recipient to send back a copy of their response to the customer as a follow-up. However, unlike the

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<sup>4</sup> Proportional breakdown unavailable.

<sup>5</sup> Proportional breakdown unavailable.

LIRR, Metro-North offers written responses to customer reports (comment cards) upon request.

An eight-business-day turnaround time is offered for both standard correspondence and customer reports, and is currently met. If a full response cannot be made within eight business days, an acknowledgement of receipt will be mailed to the writer. Progress is measured with reference to the achievement of the turnaround goal, effectiveness of responses, and a numerical customer complaint index.

### **New York City Transit**

At NYC Transit, four customer service representatives and one manager are charged with answering correspondence. Supervisors review responses for accuracy.

Approximately 400 letters are received per month.<sup>6</sup> Most of these (63%) are complaints, with the balance made up of commendations (10%), suggestions (3%), and a large category of unclassified correspondence (25%).

The turnaround goal for correspondence is the completion of 90% of monthly correspondence volumes within 21 days. This goal is currently met. In periods of high volume, the division is able to add staff. Like the MTA commuter rail agencies, NYC Transit will forward letters to outside agencies, when necessary. However, it does not track these referrals.

Progress is measured monthly with reference to achievement of turnaround goals and adequacy of responses.

### **New Jersey Transit**

NJ Transit employs five customer service representatives to handle correspondence, with work assigned and monitored by a supervisor. However, these personnel are drawn from the same staff that handles telephone inquiries.

Average monthly correspondence volume ranges between 80 and 120 letters. A turnaround time of between seven and ten days is offered, and this goal is currently met. NJ Transit will also forward mail to other agencies, as necessary, and will request a copy of the response.

Progress is measured through quarterly assessments conducted by the unit supervisor. In the future, the department hopes to expand its staff to create a team dedicated solely to correspondence.

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<sup>6</sup> NYC Transit does not offer customer comment cards.

## Synopsis of Telephone and Correspondence Units

One of the most notable observations about the MTA agency customer communications departments is that their goals and objectives vary widely. For example, the LIRR, Metro-North, and NYC Transit have different telephone wait goals of 90, 20, and 93 seconds respectively. Metro-North is the only MTA agency which meets its telephone wait goal, even though the wait goals set by the LIRR and NYC Transit are much more permissive.

**Table 1: Telephone Wait Goals (Versus Average Waiting Time) for MTA Transit Agencies, in Seconds**

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Goal</b>	<b>(Average)</b>
LIRR	90	(124)
Metro-North	20	( 20)
NYC Transit	93	(102)

Similar variation is observed for customer correspondence. Correspondence turnaround goals vary from a low of eight business days (12 days maximum) for Metro-North, 15 days for the LIRR, and 21 days for NYC Transit. The LIRR is the only MTA agency which does not meet its turnaround goal for correspondence. NYC Transit meets its turnaround goal, but this goal only covers 90 percent of the correspondence it receives. Thus, Metro-North is the only MTA agency which meets its turnaround goal for its entire volume of correspondence. Metro-North meets its more stringent goal though it receives, on average, approximately 75 percent of the correspondence volume reported by NYC Transit, the agency with the longest turnaround time.

**Table 2: Correspondence Turnaround Goals (Versus Percentage of Correspondence Volume Meeting Goal) for MTA Agencies**

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Goal</b>	<b>(% Met)</b>
LIRR	10 days	( 88%)
Metro-North	8 days <sup>7</sup>	(100%)
NYC Transit	21 days	(100%)

Another important difference exists in the mission statements of the customer communications departments of all the referenced agencies. These statements help establish the corporate culture which will guide customer service activities. The mission statement of the NJ Transit Customer Service Department is formal and detailed, and considers customer loyalty and the customers' perception of the organization. While the mission statements of the LIRR Customer Communications Department and the Metro-North Railroad Customer Services Department also note the importance of the customer, they are far less formal in nature. In sharpest contrast to NJ Transit, the mission statement of NYC Transit's Customer Assistance Division concentrates instead on the provision of information rather than on customer loyalty or perception.

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<sup>7</sup> Business days.

Finally, each of the four departments is exploring or implementing new procedures and technologies to better serve their customers. For example, the LIRR is testing a new voice response telephone system, Metro-North has recently opened a new, computerized customer service center, NYC Transit is testing a new telephone itinerary planning system, and staff increases are planned for the correspondence unit at NJ Transit.

## Telephone and Correspondence Unit Surveys

In order to confirm whether performance data provided by the MTA agencies bore out in practice from the customer's perspective, the PCAC conducted non-randomized surveys of the MTA agency telephone and correspondence units in mid-1999. The results of these surveys are presented below.

### **Telephone Information Unit Survey**

Two customer inquiries each were placed with the telephone information units of the LIRR, Metro-North, and NYC Transit. The inquiries included a route information request during normal system operation and a route information request during a service diversion. For each inquiry, callers selected to hold and speak with a representative. In no instance did callers identify themselves as PCAC representatives. The local New York City phone numbers were used for the commuter railroads.

Hold times for each of the six calls were notable, with waits ranging from zero to 14 minutes. For example, a Metro-North representative was available immediately while the caller waited 14 minutes for an LIRR representative for calls placed on the same day. In addition, in one instance the author encountered busy signals four times when attempting to phone NYC Transit.

**Table 3: Hold Wait Times and Adequacy of Information from Survey of MTA Agency Telephone Units**

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Inquiry Type</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>On Hold</b>	<b>Wait Goal</b>	<b>Adequate Info</b>
LIRR	normal service	7/16/99	3:41pm	300 sec.	90 sec.	yes
LIRR	diversion	7/19/99	1:44pm	840 sec.	90 sec.	yes
Metro-North	normal service	7/16/99	3:16pm	360 sec.	20 sec.	yes
Metro-North	diversion	7/19/99	12:29pm	0 sec.	20 sec.	yes
NYC Transit	normal service	7/16/99	3:36pm <sup>8</sup>	120 sec.	93 sec.	yes
NYC Transit	diversion	7/19/99	3:19pm	320 sec.	93 sec.	no <sup>9</sup>

Although all three agencies' operators gave accurate route and fare information, none of the operators reported service diversions until the caller prompted, "Is there anything I should be aware of when travelling?" Upon being prompted, the LIRR and Metro-North operators provided accurate diversion information. However, the NYC Transit operator reported no diversions were in effect on the route in question, even though the MTA website listed a service diversion.

### **Correspondence Unit Survey**<sup>10</sup>

Two written requests were posted to each of the agencies. These requests included a general service inquiry regarding fares and routes and a more specific inquiry regarding an actual problem reported to the PCAC by one or more customers. In no instance did the writers identify themselves as PCAC representatives.

<sup>8</sup> Line was previously busy for three consecutive calling attempts begun at 3:14 p.m.

<sup>9</sup> Diversion information given by telephone representative differed from corresponding information given on the MTA website.

<sup>10</sup> Copies of all survey correspondence are available upon request.

The LIRR and Metro-North answered the service and problem inquiry letters accurately. The problem inquiries were answered very quickly at six business days for the LIRR and five business days for Metro-North. However, each took longer to address the service inquiry, at 22 business days for LIRR and 20 business days for Metro-North.<sup>11</sup>

NYC Transit did not respond to either inquiry on the first mailing, and never answered the service inquiry. For both inquiries, the agency failed to meet its own 21-day turnaround response goal for correspondence. The problem inquiry was first mailed on June 23 and then on August 18. The response to the problem inquiry was received on October 10, which represents 36 business days from posting. The service inquiry letter was first mailed on June 2 and then again on August 20. A response was never received.

**Table 4: Turnaround Times and Adequacy of Responses from Survey of MTA Correspondence Units, for Letters**

<u>Agency</u>	<u>Inquiry Type</u>	<u>Sent</u>	<u>Reply Rec'd</u>	<u>Turnaround<sup>12</sup></u>	<u>Goal<sup>13</sup></u>	<u>Adequate Reply</u>
LIRR	service	6/02/99	7/02/99	30 days	10 days	yes
LIRR	problem	6/23/99	7/01/99	8 days	10 days	yes
MNR	service	6/02/99	6/30/99	25 days <sup>14</sup>	8 days <sup>15</sup>	yes
MNR	problem	6/23/99	6/30/99	7 days <sup>16</sup>	8 days <sup>17</sup>	yes
NYCT	service	6/02/99	None	NA	21 days	NA
		8/20/99 (2nd mailing)				
NYCT	problem	6/23/99	10/05/99 <sup>18</sup>	49 days	21 days	yes
		8/18/99 (2nd mailing)				

The PCAC separately surveyed response times for customer comment cards. As with the standard correspondence inquiries, comment cards were sent to each commuter railroad regarding service and problem inquiries. The LIRR offers comment cards in Spanish for bilingual riders, thus, requests were sent to the LIRR in both English and Spanish.

The first set of inquiries was mailed to the LIRR the week of July 22. The author indicated that written responses were requested. The railroad did not respond to any of the comment cards. The author re-sent one set of inquires on August 24 and August 25 and included a phone number. The railroad did supply a telephone response to the English language inquiry but not the Spanish language inquiry. The PCAC was later informed by the railroad that it does not offer written responses to customer comment

<sup>11</sup> Response times are from day of posting; both agencies met their turnaround goals for the survey letters.

<sup>12</sup> From date of posting.

<sup>13</sup> From date of receipt by agency.

<sup>14</sup> Business days.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Response received only after second mailing.

cards, although members of the Long Island Rail Road Commuters' Council (LIRRCC)<sup>19</sup> regularly receive written responses to LIRR comment cards.

**Table 5: Turnaround Times and Adequacy of Responses from Survey of MTA Correspondence Units, for Comment Cards**

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Inquiry Type</b>	<b>Sent</b>	<b>Reply Rec'd</b>	<b>Turnaround<sup>20</sup></b>	<b>Goal<sup>21</sup></b>	<b>Adequate Reply</b>
LIRR	service (Engl.)	7/22/99	None	NA	10 days	NA
LIRR	service (Span.)	7/26/99	None	NA	10 days	NA
LIRR	problem (Engl.)	7/27/99	7/01/99 <sup>22</sup>	8 days	10 days	yes
		8/25/99 (2nd mailing)				
LIRR	problem (Span.)	7/29/99	None	NA	10 days	NA
		8/24/99 (2nd mailing)				
MNR	service	7/27/99	8/03/99	5 days <sup>23</sup>	8 days <sup>24</sup>	yes
MNR	problem	7/30/99	8/09/99	6 days <sup>25</sup>	8 days <sup>26</sup>	yes

Metro-North customer reports (comment cards) do offer the option of a written response, and such was requested. The cards were answered by mail within six business days from day of posting, easily meeting Metro-North's eight-business-day turnaround time.

**Synopsis of Telephone and Correspondence Unit Surveys**

Although these surveys are only illustrative, the results are troubling. Except in the case of Metro-North, the MTA agencies did not perform as well in the surveys as might be expected from the data supplied to the PCAC. NYC Transit answered only one of four letters. The LIRR answered only one of six customer comment cards, and none in Spanish. The LIRR claims to not offer written responses to comment cards, yet it has responded by mail to LIRRCC members who submit comment cards. Further, LIRR comment cards do not state that a written response will not be made.

Equally troubling, in an interview with LIRR Customer Service personnel, the PCAC learned that the agency does not have bilingual staff designated to answer its own Spanish-language comment cards.

<sup>19</sup> One of the three state-mandated riders councils for which the PCAC serves as the funding and coordinating mechanism and provides staffing services. For more information, visit the PCAC website at [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org).

<sup>20</sup> From date of posting.

<sup>21</sup> From date of receipt by agency.

<sup>22</sup> Response received only after second mailing.

<sup>23</sup> Business days.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

## **New Interactive Technologies**

While conventional telephone and correspondence units supply travel information upon request, there is a relative lack of timeliness in the information they can provide. However, in recent years, the public transportation industry has begun to explore new technologies which allow agencies to communicate service information much more rapidly than previously possible. These technologies take advantage of advances in automation and software to gather real-time system-status information, and utilize interactive telephone systems and the Internet to disseminate this information immediately to customers. This section examines how such technologies are used both within and beyond the MTA region.

### **Agency Websites and E-mail**

Comprehensive agency websites that offer route, fare, and schedule information and, in some cases, real-time system status information are becoming the norm. Some agency websites are interactive, allowing customers to communicate with the agency via e-mail or offering automated trip-planning services. Such websites can reach a high volume of customers in an efficient and timely manner and can handle a much larger volume of inquiries than telephone and correspondence units. They can also be structured to provide answers to the most frequently asked questions in easy-to-find locations.

Further, unlike telephone and written inquiries, customers can browse the information contained on agency websites at any time, without the intrusion of hold or turnaround times. This makes the web a convenient resource for many public transportation customers. As Internet access from home, work, or school becomes the norm, demand will only increase for all service industries, including public transportation, to provide for Internet-based means of communication.<sup>27</sup>

### **The MTA**

Currently, the MTA prohibits its operating agencies from accepting e-mail. The MTA reports that neither it nor the operating agencies has the resources to deal with the large volume of customer inquiries they would expect to receive by e-mail. However, both the LIRR and NYC Transit are exploring the feasibility of accepting customer e-mails.

The MTA does support the provision of information via the World Wide Web, and maintains a website where customers may find a significant amount of service information for all MTA agencies. The website takes advantage of the latest design technology and is easy to navigate. The most important service information, including schedule, fare, and diversion information, is linked from the main page.

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<sup>27</sup> The 1999 Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council's LIRR Report Card illustrates this demand. Ninety percent of riders surveyed have access to e-mail and, of this group, eighty percent said they would be very likely or likely to use e-mail to contact the railroad. *Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council 1999 LIRR Report Card*, (October 1999), p. 5. [Report available upon demand, or may be downloaded from the PCAC website at [www.pcac.org](http://www.pcac.org)]

However, gaps exist in the implementation of the website which, if corrected, would help the site to better serve the needs of customers. While schedules and maps are linked from the main page, commuter railroad information is not. Further, customers are eventually led to individual schedule, fare, and diversion pages for each agency. These pages each utilize a different method to present service information to customers, depending on the agency. This fragmented presentation of service information makes it difficult for customers to plan trips which involve the transit services of more than one of the MTA agencies.

The Internet address for the website, [www.mta.nyc.ny.us](http://www.mta.nyc.ny.us), is long and cumbersome to use. Many transit agencies cities such as Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., have registered and promoted domain names which are shorter and easier for customers to remember (e.g. [www.septa.org](http://www.septa.org)). However, the MTA has not explored this option.

Moreover, although websites can be updated at will, providing transit agencies a medium to disseminate real-time service information during disruptions, this is rarely done on the MTA site. During 1999, only Metro-North took advantage of this functionality, informing customers of service problems during two weather emergencies.

### **London Transport**

London Transport is similar to NYC Transit in that it operates extensive bus and subway networks, carrying nearly 6.5 million passengers per day. London Transport does accept e-mail, and is representative of many transit major agencies in this respect. The agency feels that e-mail is an integral aspect of customer communications, because of its convenience and ever-growing popularity.<sup>28</sup> The agency began accepting e-mail in September 1996 and since that time has found no change in telephone and correspondence volumes.

The London Transport website offers separate e-mail addresses for service related inquiries, travel inquiries, and comments related to the website. Also available is an electronic comment form, similar to the printed comment cards offered by the LIRR and Metro-North. Turnaround times for e-mail inquiries are clearly posted on the website, with an initial response promised within three business days. The agency uses the same turnaround goal for both e-mail and written correspondence, currently 14 business days. This is because the agency routes e-mail through the same internal, paper-based communications procedures.

The London Transport website takes better advantage of contemporary design standards than does the MTA site and is easier to navigate. Service information for both rail and bus are linked from one main travel information page. This information includes schedules, fares, maps, planned and unplanned service disruptions, and visitor resources. In addition, the agency is in the process of adapting its internal trip-planning software system for use on the web by customers.

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<sup>28</sup> E-mail correspondence with Webmaster, London Transport. (August 1999)

### **New Jersey Transit**

NJ Transit is the only major transit provider in the New York region which currently accepts customer e-mail. The agency receives from 35 to 60 e-mails per day on average. The agency's website encourages users to submit comments via e-mail and promises a response. NJ Transit also sends service and policy updates directly to customers who have provided their e-mail addresses.

The NJ Transit Customer Service Department uses different mechanisms for e-mail than for traditional correspondence. Responses are offered within a turnaround time of between 10 and 14 days. However, customers receive an immediate automated response when an e-mail is first received. The agency has experienced problems with meeting its turnaround goal, possibly because a single, part-time staffer is employed to answer all e-mail inquiries. However, the unit is developing a tracking system to categorize and summarize key issues raised via e-mail.

The agency website is much less well presented than the MTA site, does not take advantage of contemporary design standards, and includes links to pages which no longer exist (broken links). Consequently, it is more difficult to navigate to find desired information. However, the site does offer regularly updated system status advisories on the main page.

### **Virginia Railway Express**

The Virginia Railway Express (VRE) commuter rail agency began accepting e-mail in 1996. The VRE system is small in comparison with the MTA agencies, carrying approximately 8,000 customers per day in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C.

According to VRE, e-mail serves the agency in two respects. It encourages easy, convenient, and timely communications from customers and it educates management as to the needs of its riders. Further, the employees at VRE that respond perform multiple tasks, including acting as customer advocates, researching and responding to inquiries, and sharing information related by customers to management and staff.<sup>29</sup> VRE management feels that such multi-tasking helps enhance the link between customers and management and allows the agency to make more customer friendly decisions.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike London Transport, VRE did experience a significant drop in traditional correspondence after it began accepting e-mail, although not a drop in telephone inquiries. The agency increased its customer services staff to handle e-mail, incurring additional labor costs. Other necessary costs included the purchase of new computer equipment and software. However, VRE believes the benefits of customer e-mail outweigh the initial costs.

A three-business-day turnaround time for customer e-mail is offered. When an answer is not available within three business days, an interim e-mail is sent to inform customers

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<sup>29</sup> E-mail correspondence with Maria Flavin, Virginia Railway Express. (August 1999)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

that the agency is working on a response. VRE has also developed an automated e-mail system to send service and policy information to riders on a regular basis, and uses e-mail to conduct customer surveys.

The VRE website offers all relevant service information to customers. However, due to VRE's modest size, this represents a much smaller amount of information than is provided by the other websites discussed above. Thus, the VRE website is not directly comparable.

### **Real-Time System Status Technologies**

In this section, initiatives allowing the provision of regional, real-time travel information are explored. Real-time information assists customers by letting them know what travel conditions to expect before they begin their trips. The initiatives explored here offer information via both telephone and Internet media.

#### ***iTravel* Initiative**

Focusing on a regional, multi-modal approach to customer communications and travel information, the MTA has teamed with other regional public transportation agencies, departments of transportation, and thruway authorities to create the *iTravel* initiative. *iTravel* is one of a small number of federally funded travel information initiatives underway across the country to test the feasibility of regional, real-time information technologies. The Transportation Operations Coordinating Committee (TRANSCOM), which currently serves as the New York area's provider of real-time traffic information to media outlets, is charged with developing the initiative's approach for the dissemination of travel information.

This approach calls for the packaging of information into three featured "products": real-time travel information accessible by telephone and the *iTravel* website; the Transit Itinerary Planning System (TRIPS 123), also accessible by telephone and on the web; and the Personalized Travel Service (PTS), which will automatically deliver customized real-time travel information, for a fee, via telephone, pager, fax, or e-mail.

The TRIPS 123 program is to be fully launched by September 2000 and will be the primary, comprehensive source for transit itinerary information in the New York region, including information about MTA services. Available information will include schedules, fares, and real-time diversion information, as well as maps via the *iTravel* website.

The *iTravel* website will provide services not currently offered on the MTA's own website. Although the MTA site provides weekly diversion updates, there is little provision made for real-time service information, except in periods of extreme weather emergency.<sup>31</sup> The MTA also does not offer a trip-planning option on its Internet site.

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<sup>31</sup> An example of an extreme weather emergency during which real-time status information was posted to the MTA website was Tropical Storm Floyd in September of 1999. Due to the storm, Metro-North services were heavily disrupted. The agency posted regular system status updates, linked directly from the main page of the site, to inform riders about the availability of service.

Neither the *iTravel* website nor telephone unit will replace the MTA's own website or the information numbers for the individual MTA agencies. However, as of this writing, the MTA is unable to specify to what extent and for what purposes it might direct its customers to *iTravel* sources.

### **Interactive Kiosks**

An additional element of the TRANSCOM initiative is a system of interactive customer information kiosks. The system, Service Area Traveler Information Network (SATIN), utilizes electronic kiosks provided by Golden Screen Technologies, a private TRANSCOM partner. Already in operation in several locations, SATIN offers users real-time transit and roadway information, including current and planned diversions and construction projects. Further, each kiosk is site sensitive and provides travel information relevant to its location. For example, the Stamford Metro-North Railroad/Amtrak Station kiosk displays information relevant to Stamford commuters.<sup>32</sup>

Kiosks are linked via a dedicated Internet connection to a central web server, and information is updated every seven to eight minutes. Kiosks are capable of accepting interactive feedback from users, which is used to improve the system. Operating revenue is generated by the sale of on-screen banner advertising space, similar to advertising banners found on Internet websites. Future kiosks are planned for several MTA station locations, Connecticut Thruway rest stops, and Port Authority of New York and New Jersey facilities.

### **SmartRoute/SmarTraveler High-Volume Automated Phone Systems**

SmartRoute is a private firm which operates a proprietary, high-volume, automated telephone information system, similar to *iTravel*'s planned TRIPS system, dubbed SmarTraveler, to disseminate real-time transit and roadway information in several major U.S. metropolitan areas. Travel information is gathered through an ongoing, coordinated effort between SmarTraveler and regional departments of transportation and transit providers.

SmarTraveler information systems generally offer a local telephone number where callers can access regularly updated status reports for specific transit and highway routes, each route identified by a code which callers key into their telephones. Phone systems are fully automated in order to rapidly handle large volumes of calls, and data is updated every 10 to 15 minutes.<sup>33</sup> In most instances, telephone systems are supplemented by a website where travel information is also available.

Similar to the SATIN kiosk system, operations are privately funded through advertising sales.

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Glenn Gruber, Golden Screens Interactive Technologies. (August 1999)

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Eli Sherer, SmarTraveler. (June 1999)

Also similar to SATIN, SmartRoute solicits customer feedback in order to monitor the operations of its SmarTraveler systems and occasionally intercepts calls to conduct customer surveys. The agency also holds focus groups to help gauge customer needs.

A typical SmarTraveler system is operated in the Boston metropolitan area, a region with highly used roadway and transit networks similar to New York. The Boston SmarTraveler telephone unit is open weekdays only from 5:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., excluding holidays. The unit operates 120 lines, and management can add capacity as necessary, depending on call volume. On average, Boston SmarTraveler receives between 12,000 and 15,000 calls per day. However, daily call volumes as high as 32,000 have been recorded. Because the SmarTraveler information unit is completely automated, calls are generally answered on the first ring and there is no waiting time. The average length of each call is 60 –70 seconds.

To help disseminate travel information more widely, in January 2000, Boston SmarTraveler launched a new rush hour cable television program offering travel updates every five minutes during peak travel hours. In addition, SmartRoute is considering the addition of a computerized speech-synthesis engine to its SmarTraveler telephone systems nationwide to eliminate the current need to record numerous live voice updates.

#### **Automatic Vehicle Location Systems**

The development of interactive customer communication technologies is occurring simultaneously with the development of real-time fleet-tracking systems, known as automatic vehicle location (AVL) systems. AVL systems determine the physical location of transit vehicles as well as their expected times of arrival at given locations along a route. Real-time data from AVL systems can be used to add a heretofore unprecedented level of detail, timeliness, and convenience to service information supplied to customers.

NYC Transit is in the process of developing three AVL-based systems: the Automatic Vehicle Location and Control (AVLC) system for buses; and the Automatic Train Supervision (ATS) and Communications Based Train Control (CBTC) systems for subways. If demonstration projects are successful, these systems can be used to aid in the provision of real-time information via the MTA's own website and, eventually, at subway stations and bus stops. This information can also be shared with *iTravel*. However, full implementation of these technologies by the agency remains years away.

#### **Synopsis of New Interactive Technologies**

By not allowing its agencies to communicate with customers via e-mail, the MTA is behind the industry curve. Other major carriers, including London Transport and NJ Transit, recognize that electronic communications have become commonplace and encourage customer e-mails in order to meet the expectations of their riders.

While the MTA website does take advantage of contemporary design standards, making it easy to navigate, service information remains fragmented and the provision of real-time diversion information is almost nonexistent.

Transit users in the New York region will eventually be able to rely upon real-time information offered by *iTravel*. However, this will not replace the need for the MTA to maintain and update its own website and telephone information systems.

One MTA agency, NYC Transit, is in the process of developing advanced vehicle-tracking systems for its bus and rail fleets. These systems can be used to aid the provision of real-time service information via both the MTA's own website and telephone systems and those of *iTravel* and, in the future, at subway stations and bus stops.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Although in general the MTA agencies do spend a good deal of time and effort working to improve customer communications practices and policies, this paper demonstrates that several key areas exist which deserve special attention. Wide variations in goal setting and achievement were found among the telephone and correspondence units of the MTA agencies, borne out in nonrandomized surveys. While each agency excels in some area of customer communications, only Metro-North demonstrated consistency in meeting goals for telephone wait and correspondence turnaround times.

Further, only ad hoc information sharing exists among the agencies, exacerbated by the lack of a formal, MTA-wide customer communications policy. MTA-wide policies which do exist serve to inhibit the technological development of customer communications at the agency level, specifically the policy banning Internet-based communication.

In order to improve the reliability and usefulness of MTA customer communications, the PCAC offers the following recommendations:

### **Recommendations to the MTA**

The MTA should establish a **formal, unified customer-communications policy** to better coordinate policy and information-sharing among the agencies. With such a strategy in place, the individual customer communications units at the MTA agencies might more readily communicate with each other, and thus learn from each other's communications strategies.

In keeping with the industry standard, the MTA should **immediately allow customers to communicate with the agencies via e-mail** and adjust staff levels and responsibilities accordingly. E-mail usage will only continue to grow as a preferred method of communication and the MTA needs to meet this demand or risk failing the needs of its customers. If the MTA fears receiving large amounts of "spam" (junk e-mail), it can explore techniques, such as requiring names, addresses, and telephone numbers of correspondents, or limiting customer correspondence to on-line forms, which can help guard against inappropriate messages.

The MTA should **better integrate the provision of travel information on the MTA website**. Route, fare, and schedule information should be provided in a consistent manner for all MTA agencies, and should facilitate the planning of trips involving more than one agency's transit services. Real-time information about system delays and diversions should be made available. In order to remain as useful as possible for customers, the site should be regularly updated and retooled to take advantage of the most up-to-date Internet technologies.

The MTA should **register a shorter, less-cumbersome Internet domain name**. A shorter name, such as mta.gov or nymta.gov, would be easier for the agency to promote in customer literature and easier for riders to use and remember.

The MTA should specify the information it intends to share with the *iTravel* regional travel-information demonstration project, including information for which customers will be directed to *iTravel* sources instead of MTA sources. The MTA should **refrain from overreliance on *iTravel* services**, to the detriment of the continued improvement and expansion of MTA agency customer communications departments and the MTA website.

### **Recommendations to the MTA Agencies**

All MTA agency customer communications departments should **maintain a formal, clear, and detailed mission statement** to guide departmental policy and activities. These statements should reflect a clear customer-service orientation and should focus on the informational needs specific to each agency's riders. The departments should refer to the statements to help ensure that their activities are geared towards better meeting the needs of riders rather than on simply satisfying the minimum communications requirements.

The LIRR and Metro-North telephone information units should have the **ability to seamlessly transfer calls** to any other MTA transit agency requested by a customer, without the need for a customer to hang up and redial. This service would better meet the needs of riders, who do not always make a distinction between the MTA operating agencies or who may request operational information for a connecting service. The MTA should not rely solely on the *iTravel* initiative to provide this service unless it intends for the *iTravel* telephone information center to take the place of the telephone information centers at the individual MTA agencies.

The LIRR should work to **reduce its waiting time for telephone inquiries**. Currently, the telephone wait goal at the LIRR is 90 seconds, far longer than the goal of 20 seconds maintained by its sister commuter rail agency, Metro-North. Worse, on average the LIRR does not meet this longer goal. Given that the two agencies are of comparable size and receive similar volumes of calls, the PCAC believes the LIRR should work to meet this higher standard.

The LIRR should ensure that **all customer comment cards receive answers**, including Spanish-language cards. This includes designating bilingual staff to answer Spanish-language cards. It is unacceptable for any customer comment card to go unanswered, as occurred during the PCAC's correspondence survey. The LIRR should also follow the lead of Metro-North and **offer written responses** to customer comment cards.

NYC Transit should **reduce its turnaround goal for written responses** to correspondence which at 21 days is more than twice as long as the turnaround goal set by LIRR and Metro-North. Although a smaller agency, Metro-North receives, on average, approximately 75 percent of the correspondence volume reported by NYC Transit while still maintaining a far shorter turnaround time. NYC Transit might want to consult with Metro-North to explore possible methods for improving its own turnaround time. NYC Transit should also ensure that all customer correspondence is answered.

Finally, NYC Transit should ensure that the **Automatic Vehicle Location and Control (AVLC)** program for buses and the **Automatic Train Supervision (ATS) and Communications Based Train Control (CBTC)** programs for subways, now pilot projects, be brought to fruition systemwide. Although these programs were primarily devised to improve service, they will provide real-time data about system status and the location of vehicles. This data can and should be integrated with customer-communications technologies to improve the provision of real-time travel information via the telephone and the Internet, and, eventually, at subway stations and bus stops.

## **Appendix A: Websites of Referenced Agencies**

Metropolitan Transportation Authority	<a href="http://www.mta.nyc.ny.us">www.mta.nyc.ny.us</a>
London Transport	<a href="http://www.londontransport.co.uk">www.londontransport.co.uk</a>
Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority	<a href="http://www.mbta.com">www.mbta.com</a>
Massachusetts Port Authority (“Massport”)	<a href="http://www.massport.com">www.massport.com</a>
New Jersey Transit	<a href="http://www.njtransit.state.nj.us">www.njtransit.state.nj.us</a>
SmarTraveler	<a href="http://www.smartraveler.com">www.smartraveler.com</a>
Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority	<a href="http://www.septa.org">www.septa.org</a>
Traffic Station	<a href="http://www.trafficstation.org">www.trafficstation.org</a>
Virginia Railway Express	<a href="http://www.vre.org">www.vre.org</a>