

Just a Friendly Reminder: Be Courteous While on the LIRR

**Results of the 2006 Long Island Rail Road Commuter's Council
Customer Courtesy Survey**

September 2006

Introduction

There are a number of factors that influence customer satisfaction with service on the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR). The quality of riders' experience on the LIRR depends primarily on the efforts of Rail Road staff and management. The Long Island Rail Road Commuter's Council has long campaigned for improved equipment, expanded service, and more effective communication between the LIRR and its passengers. The Rail Road has made important strides in these areas and is continuing to pursue ways of improving service.

Some factors that affect the quality of travel on the LIRR, however, are not under the direct control of the Rail Road. Access and station area facilities that are maintained by local governments or private parties are often among the most important influences on riders' satisfaction with using the LIRR. For example, the location, cost, and availability of parking often determine where and when commuters will begin their trip on the LIRR.

One factor not under direct control of the Rail Road that greatly affects the quality of the commuter's experience is the behavior of other riders. While some may disagree, a common perception among LIRR users is that rider behavior has worsened in recent years to a point that it is negatively affecting the quality of life on the trains. Advances in technology, such as cellular telephones and portable audio players, have contributed to this change, as perhaps have changes in society's standards of behavior. Regardless of the cause of this change in perception, the LIRRCC is hearing a growing number of riders expressing their dissatisfaction with travel on the Rail Road based primarily on customer courtesy issues.

The Long Island Rail Road Commuter's Council (LIRRCC) conducted this survey as a means to answer two basic questions: first, how widespread is discourteous behavior among LIRR riders, and second, what is the relative incidence of different types of behavior that may be problematic to other riders. The Council has identified improving customer courtesy as a priority area for LIRRCC action and will use the results of this investigation to target its efforts in the area of increasing customer courtesy.

Methodology

The customer courtesy survey was conducted in a two-month period between June 1 and July 31, 2006. Long Island Rail Road Commuter's Council members traveled on the LIRR as they normally would, recording the date, origin, destination, and boarding time of each trip segment that they completed. Once on the train, members recorded instances where customers engaged in behavior that might be considered annoying, troublesome, or offensive to other riders. Examples of this behavior included passengers placing their feet on seats, loud electronic games or leakage of sound from headphones, loud conversations, extended cellphone conversations, passengers occupying multiple seats on crowded trains, and littering. The appendix of this report contains the instructions given to the surveyors.

Because the survey relied on information collected in the course of the members' normal course of travel, it is not appropriate to extrapolate from these results to create a precise measure of the level of customer courtesy on the LIRR as a whole. Our members did not

travel on all parts of the system; several branches and portions of branches were not surveyed. Also, even in the segments of the system that the LIRRCC surveyed, our observations do not constitute a statistically valid random sample of all trips. As is the case with most commuters, the trains that our members ride are highly dependent upon their daily schedules and are not randomly selected. Few of our observations involved midday or late night trips and our results largely do not reflect conditions in these periods. At the same time, our members' commuting patterns are fairly typical, and their general observations are likely shared by many other riders.

Overall Results

The survey includes observations from 316 trips taken on the LIRR. Members reported at least one customer courtesy problem in 134 or 43.1 percent of these trips. On some of these trips, surveyors observed multiple customer courtesy issues, so there were a total of 172 customer courtesy problems identified in these 316 trips. While several of these issues involved colorful incidents similar to those reported recently in *Newsday*,¹ most of the issues were everyday annoyances that are familiar to most riders. On some trips, there were several incidents that fell within a single category. In these cases all incidents that fell within a single category were counted as a single issue.

Our results confirm the common perception that excessive cellphone usage is a pervasive customer courtesy issue. LIRRCC surveyors observed extended cellphone conversations during almost one in every six trips on the Rail Road, and these conversations occurred almost twice as often as any other single customer courtesy issue. While less frequent, passengers with feet on seats, engaging in loud conversation, occupying multiple seats, or littering were also observed regularly by the surveyors.

Customer Courtesy Issues	Extended Cellphone Conversations	Feet on Seats	Littering	Loud Conversation	Loud Electronic Games/ Headphones Leaking Sound	Occupying Multiple Seats	Other
Percent of Trips	16.1%	9.2%	8.9%	7.6%	1.9%	6.6%	4.1%

Inbound Versus Outbound Trips

As might be expected, direction of travel and time of day appear to have a substantial impact on the level of customer courtesy. It should be noted that a large proportion of the trips that were surveyed occurred in peak hours in the primary direction of travel. Overall, there were substantially fewer customer courtesy issues on inbound trips to New York City than on outbound trips. LIRRCC surveyors observed customer courtesy issues in only 32.7 percent

¹ Among the more notable incidents observed were the passenger who used her "train time" to attend to flossing her teeth and the intoxicated passenger who got up from his seat to vomit on the platform at a station stop, afterward returning to his seat.

of inbound trips, but 54.7 percent of outbound trips presented at least one customer courtesy issue.

Customer Courtesy Issues	Extended Cellphone Conversations	Feet on Seats	Littering	Loud Conversation	Loud Electronic Games/ Headphones Leaking Sound	Occupying Multiple Seats	Other
Percent of Inbound Trips	7.1%	11.3%	5.4%	9.5%	2.4%	1.2%	1.8%
Percent of Outbound Trips	26.4%	6.8%	12.8%	5.4%	1.4%	12.8%	6.8%

The total number of customer courtesy issues observed is not the whole story. The distribution of the types of issues observed is markedly different between the inbound and outbound trips. On inbound trips, the problems of feet on seats, loud games or headphones, and loud conversation were observed more often than on outbound trips. On outbound trips, extended cellphone use, the use of multiple seats on crowded trains, and littering were observed relatively more frequently. The contrast between inbound and outbound trips is particularly striking with cellphone issues, which were observed on 26.4 percent of outbound trips but only 7.1 percent of inbound trips. It is not difficult to think of plausible reasons for these differences, but it is important to keep them in mind in developing strategies to increase customer courtesy on the LIRR.

Conclusions

While the importance of customer courtesy does not rise to the level of safety or on time performance in the minds of commuters, the behavior of other customers can and does have a substantial impact on the quality of life on the LIRR. LIRRCC surveyors observed discourteous behavior in more than four in ten trips, which is far too high a proportion. Enforcement of existing rules by train personnel can help in improving customer courtesy, but we recognize that having LIRR personnel function as the full time “manners police” is neither feasible nor desirable.

Instead, the responsibility for customer courtesy falls squarely on the shoulders of riders. As the representative of LIRR riders, the LIRRCC recognizes its responsibility to work toward improving the atmosphere aboard trains. We look forward to collaborating with the LIRR to improve the level of customer courtesy on the Rail Road and believe that with the combined efforts of the LIRR and its users riding the train can be made a more relaxing and pleasant experience.

Appendix Survey Instructions

MEMORANDUM

TO: LIRRCC Members

FROM: Bill Henderson
Associate Director

RE: Customer Courtesy Survey

DATE: May 23, 2006

As was discussed at the May 11 LIRRCC meeting, our 2006 research project will be to document customer courtesy issues that are arising on the LIRR. The mechanics of this survey will be very similar to last year's customer communication survey. Once again, members will gather information in their normal course of riding the LIRR; no special trips will be required. This year your task will be to record examples of discourteous customer behavior. We will also be tracking whether customer courtesy reminder announcements are made and if so whether they are being made at appropriate times during the trip. Like last year, we will be furnishing LIRRCC members with spiral bound books of index cards ("observation books") in which observations should be recorded. The project will begin June 1 and continue through July 31.

Examples of the behavior that you should be recording include feet placed on seats, loud electronic games or portable music players, loud conversations, extended and disruptive cellphone calls, passengers occupying multiple seats, and riders leaving paper and other litter behind when departing the train. We're not encouraging members to confront customer courtesy offenders; we're only documenting their behavior. (Of course, you're free to follow your normal practices such as asking cellphone users to reduce their volume, etc.) Your descriptions of discourteous behavior don't need to be long; one or two sentences or phrases ought to be sufficient.

Also, you should log each trip on the LIRR on the last page and inside and outside back cover of the observation book. We will use this information like we did last year – to break out results according to branches and to establish the frequency of problems. When you log your trip, you should also note in the last column whether there were problems with the crew's customer courtesy announcements on the trip (for example, "no feet on seats" announcement being made as the train pulls into Penn Station). If there is a problem, please give us the details on an observation record.

When there is an issue with these announcements or a customer courtesy issue, you should then complete an observation record (index card). If you have several issues on a single trip,

you may combine them on a single card, as space allows. Follow the format shown on the inside front cover of the observation book in completing each observation record.

If you have any questions, call or email me at the PCAC office. I can be reached at (212) 878-7079 or whenders@mtahq.org. If you need another observation book, let us know and we will be happy to send one to you.

(Inside Front Cover of the Survey Instruction Book)

Please log each trip you take on the LIRR on the inside/outside back cover of this book.

We are keeping a record of instances of passengers' behavior that may inconvenience or annoy other passengers. Please record a brief description (one or two sentences) of each on-board incident you witness that presents a customer courtesy issue. Examples of behavior that you should record include:

- Feet on seats
- Loud electronic games/
sound from headphones
- Loud conversations
- Extended talking on cellphone
- Occupying multiple seats on
crowded train
- Littering/leaving trash & paper

Use one card per observation. On the top of each card, you should record:

Day, date, and time of the observation
Train and car number (if available)
Direction of travel (if applicable)

If courtesy announcements aren't made, are made at inappropriate time, or have any other problems, please note this on both the trip log and an observation card.