

## Customer Relations

### Summary

Good customer relations are a central aspect of public transport as the companies in this sector are not so much selling a product but providing a service. As such the quality of customer relations of a public transport provider is highly dependent on the handling of customer communication, information and complaints.

Creating a better dialogue with its customers and providing them with necessary information has great potential to increase the usage of public transport. Therefore communication with customers and passenger information has to be constantly expanded in all areas of the company. This applies not only to customer service desks but also to the information available on the Internet, in vehicles, and at stops and stations.

Efficient customer service means reacting to complaints within a reasonable timeframe. Good complaint management offers the chance to get unhappy customers back on board and bind them to the company. It also provides the chance to record and evaluate information that can be used to improve the service.

### Aims, objectives

- Build a strong relationship with the customers by improving, expanding and simplifying the information provided.
- Move away from the idea of the passenger's obligation to collect information towards the idea of the company's obligation to deliver information.
- Provide options for the customer to contact the provider in person, in writing, by telephone and e-mail.
- Respond to enquiries and complaints quickly and professionally.
- Use records about complaints and criticisms in order to improve the service.
- Introduce customer orientation as a management principle in your company.

### IN PRACTICE

#### TMB: Event-linked marketing

Sant Jordi, the memorial day of the saint of Catalonia, is a day of books and reading and also a day of roses. In 2007 Transports Metropolitans de Barcelona (TMB) realised an innovative marketing campaign linked to both themes (books and reading and roses) by creating an on-line literary contest. With the event TMB aimed to be perceived as a socially responsible corporation, linking TMB with reading and writing and, thanks



to citizens/customers participation, promoting culture.

The on-line literary contest was the axis of the campaign. A website was created where contest participants (in particular young people) could post their literary works (stories involving the bus or metro), allowing people to read the entries and send their favourites to other people.

The TMB informed the customers about the contest in an entertaining way. Video ads broadcast on metro screens allowed passengers to read excerpts of participants' stories. Customers spoke to other customers about the contest and the participants' works.

One of the main purposes was to target young people, with the aim of customers circulating information amongst themselves instead of being "pushed" to receive the info. With this strategy, the customers' participation in the communication campaign was voluntary rather than forced. It was the customer who got connected to the website, who read the stories and who sent the stories he or she wanted to post. That

way the customer controlled of his or her level of involvement in the campaign.

## Useful hints

- Customer-complaint management does not simply mean fulfilling each and every customer wish. It also has to take into account what is feasible and effective. Therefore, public transport operators should concentrate on measures that really affect customers' satisfaction levels and thus result in increased passenger numbers and ticket sales.
- Customer complaints are a rich source of up-to-date information about the state of the service. In addition to collecting and analysing comments, a mechanism must be in place for exploiting them and for implementing service improvements that can lead to greater customer satisfaction, greater knowledge of customer needs and higher economic savings for the operating company.
- Set up a variety of options for the customer to contact the provider in person, in writing, by telephone and e-mail.

## Possible problems

- Funding: despite improvements over the last decades many public transport providers still do not regard customer relations as a central aspect of their operations.
- A company culture not based on service almost certainly leads to customer dissatisfaction.
- Inaccessible or hard-to-access information on routes and timetables, unfriendly or incompetent drivers, and a feeling that customer's opinions are disregarded are still among the most common complaints about public transport providers.
- Frustration among customers leads to decreasing passenger numbers.
- Investing in customer relations by providing good and easy-to-understand information, service training for the staff and customer-complaint management pay off in the long run.

## IN PRACTICE

### Wiener Linien: Customer service

Wiener Linien is the leading public-transport provider in Vienna. In order to reflect the high importance of the information and communication needs of passengers, Wiener Linien operates an independent customer-service department. This department is the first point of contact for the customers if they are interested in additional information. The customer-service department deals directly with the customers and records their complaints, suggestions and ideas. It is not just about identifying and resolving problems — the customer-service department has the internal task of registering and communicating the wishes and needs of Wiener Linien's customers within the company.

There are numerous options for the customers to contact Wiener Linien — in writing, by telephone, e-mail, or in person. The telephone number for customer service is posted at all stops and stations. In addition, Wiener Linien also operates eight Info Points. Being located at the major traffic junctions, they enable easy and uncomplicated contact. If necessary, customer-service employees will even visit customers at their homes because, sometimes, a clarification in person together with the customer is the best way to resolve problems. Moreover, Wiener Linien seeks contact using numerous other avenues. The focus here is the consolidation of customer relations. This binds existing customers to the company and increases their loyalty in an increasingly competitive (public) transport market and increases contacts with potential customers.

*(Further information regarding in practice (Case Studies) can be found on the SPUTNIC website <http://www.sputnicproject.eu/sputnic-meetings.php>.)*