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Survey: DART customers report lower satisfaction in most categories



Tom Fox/Staff Photographer

Riders waited for their connections on Tuesday at West End Station. Over the past five years, responses from DART passengers to basic questions of safety, reliability, cleanliness and communication have all trended downward.

By MICHAEL A. LINDENBERGER

Transportation Writer

mlindenberg@dallasnews.com

Published: 10 January 2012 10:24 PM

[Dallas Area Rapid Transit](#) officials sought Tuesday to cast results from the latest customer satisfaction survey in a positive light, noting that more than nine in 10 riders would recommend the service to another.

The unscientific survey also showed that 87 percent of respondents, mostly regular commuters, are satisfied with the system. They also were very likely to say their bus drivers are safe and their trains are on time.

Beyond those results, however, the latest round of customer questionnaires indicates that DART has lost ground with riders across a range of critical points over the past five years.

The falling numbers weren't always apparent by comparing 2011 results with those from 2010, since the declines were in many cases very small.

But over the past five years, responses from DART passengers to basic questions of safety, reliability, cleanliness and communication have all trended downward. In many cases, the 2011 results were the worst since before 2007, the earliest year for which DART provided comparable data.

For instance, more riders reported missing a connection, encountering a rude bus driver or a messy bus in 2011 than in any years since before 2007, the survey said.

Fewer reported seeing fare enforcement officers on trains than at any time since before 2007. And while 85 percent of train riders said they felt safe on board, as many as 91 percent said so just four years ago.

In other areas, the drop-off in just one year was substantial.

Providing information

Asked if DART provides enough information about service failures, just 61 percent of passengers said yes. That number had been 82 percent two years ago, and fell to 66 percent in 2010. Despite a huge effort by DART to expand its use of digital media, texting, a newly revamped website and more, it lost ground in communicating to passengers when trains or buses were running late.

Nevin Grinnell, DART's new chief marketing officer, said the good news is that much has been done to address the concerns highlighted in the survey.

For instance, DART on Tuesday gave preliminary approval to a \$6 million contract to purchase 65 full-color digital signs which will be installed on 33 stations in downtown and on the Green and Red Lines.

The signs will tell passengers on the platforms when the next train is scheduled to arrive, and will be programmable by staff members from inside the transit operations center.

That means that DART can avoid the kind of meltdown that happened during last February's winter storm. Passengers were stranded in freezing conditions waiting for trains that did not come.

Improving communication

It was board member Bill Velasco, chairman at the time, who hammered on DART staff to find a way to better communicate with customers, citing an equally bad performance during the 2009 Texas–OU game.

Grinnell also noted that a new fleet of buses, which will begin arriving next year, will help address riders' concerns about the cleanliness of buses.

The new buses, fueled by compressed natural gas, will feature cameras that officials hope will put passengers more at ease when it comes to safety.

Those concerns have come as overall crime rates have fallen for Dallas and nearby cities even as they have increased near DART facilities. On Tuesday, officials said DART police have also developed a plan to help, including assigning more officers to be visible at stations.

"I want our riders to feel that the DART system is safe and secure," Chairman [John Carter](#) Danish said after the results were presented to a committee of the board Tuesday."

There were some high points in the survey, as well. Passengers who use the new website, www.dart.org, were much more likely in 2011 to report that they were able to find the information they wanted.

And bus riders were also far less likely than in previous years to say that they had been waiting at a stop and watched as a bus driver passed by without stopping.

Meanwhile, Grinnell said the survey itself needs an overhaul. Its format, which involves just asking yes or no questions, doesn't provide the kind of detailed data that would allow DART to really learn from its customers each year.

Survey results

DART distributed 50,000 questionnaires to its customers, 3,700 of whom participated in the 2011 annual survey. A look at some of their responses compared with when the survey was administered in 2007:

77%

said their buses are on time. (80% in 2007)

92%

said their trains are on time. (94% in 2007)

75%

said their transfers are on time. (85% in 2007)

61%

said DART provides adequate notice of delays. (78% in 2007)

85%

feel safe on buses. (89% in 2007)

78%

feel safe at bus stops or train stations. (80% in 2007)

85%

feel safe on trains. (87% in 2007)