Research at a Glance

Technical Brief

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Best Practices in Customer Satisfaction Surveys

Project Background

This project was undertaken to provide insights to NJ TRANSIT into best practices and lessons learned in customer satisfaction surveys in the transit industry. More broadly the project was to identify effective models and best practices that successfully capture customer feedback and provide actionable results for agencies in their data collection, public engagement, and decision-making processes.

Research Problem Statement

NJ TRANSIT has been administering a customer satisfaction survey methodology for over ten years. During this time, significant changes have occurred in the demographic, socioeconomic, environmental, and technological landscape in New Jersey and the nation. These changes have impacted travel patterns, mobility preferences, accessibility needs, and public transportation perceptions and expectations. The research aimed to generate insights, information, and data by examining effective survey methodologies and data analysis tools and incorporate perspectives from service providers and transit customers.

Research Objectives

The research objectives include:

- Identify and analyze customer satisfaction tools and methodologies
- Explore data collection and integration methods
- Study peer agency practices and opportunities
- Interview key transit agency staff about lessons learned
- Identify opportunities for improving survey design, testing, sampling, data collection, analysis, and reporting
- Discover ways to enhance survey accessibility and participation
- Enhance NJ TRANSIT customer satisfaction surveys to better reach and address the needs of marginalized communities
- Develop recommendations for best practices in customer satisfaction surveys that prioritize accessibility and accurately reflect the feedback from all customers

Methodology

Customer satisfaction survey programs were studied for sixteen peer transit organizations, interviews were conducted with three subject matter experts, and three focus groups and six one-one-one interviews were conducted about NJ TRANSIT 's customer satisfaction questionnaires. In addition, original user research was conducted with NJ TRANSIT riders to get specific feedback on the questionnaire and areas for improvement.

Results

Findings for this study include general, industry-wide, findings derived from the peer agency and subject-matter expert interviews, along with specific findings relating to NJ TRANSIT's own Customer Satisfaction Survey tool and program.

Industry-wide Findings:

- Transit agencies with CX plans achieve greater customer satisfaction by using surveys and feedback to guide improvements across the entire rider journey, supported by cross-departmental collaboration and transparent implementation.

- Effective recruitment combines multiple outreach methods—online, in-person, mobile, and social media—while minimizing incentives to avoid fraudulent responses and improve sample diversity.

- Higher response rates are achieved through shorter, focused surveys, inclusive accessibility options, and less frequent administration to allow time for meaningful improvements between survey cycles.

- Agencies enhance survey insights by integrating focus groups, targeted surveys, mystery riders, and customer service data to better understand and address key drivers of satisfaction.

User Research Findings, NJ TRANSIT Specific

- Most participants had never heard of the NJ TRANSIT Customer Satisfaction Survey and were unaware that NJ TRANSIT surveys customers at all.
- Participants were motivated by a desire to have their opinions heard, especially after a notably positive or negative experience.
- Incentives were not a strong motivator, particularly raffles or random drawings; participants preferred actual service improvements.
- Participants preferred surveys that take 5–10 minutes, with 15 minutes being the maximum acceptable duration.
- The survey was perceived as too long and repetitive; participants suggested prioritizing questions and adding a progress bar.
- Casual and multimodal riders found it difficult to respond accurately due to the survey's focus on single-mode commuting and detailed trip information.
- Participants found the survey confusing, especially regarding whether to answer based on a specific trip or overall experience, and requested clearer language and definitions.
- Participants found the 10-point Likert scale excessive and preferred a simpler 5-point scale for clarity and ease of use.
- Open-ended follow-up questions were seen as burdensome and inconsistent; participants favored closed-ended questions with optional comment boxes.
- Participants expressed a desire for NJ TRANSIT to communicate how survey feedback leads to improvements, noting that lack of follow-up reduces motivation to participate.
- Users reported confusion with specific questions and terminology, recommending clearer language, consistent framing, and improved survey flow.

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