

# ALAMEDA-CONTRA COSTA TRANSIT DISTRICT



## STAFF REPORT

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**MEETING DATE:** 6/9/2021

**Staff Report No.** 21-234a

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**TO:** AC Transit Board of Directors  
**FROM:** Michael A. Hursh, General Manager  
**SUBJECT:** Customer Satisfaction Survey

### BRIEFING ITEM

#### **RECOMMENDED ACTION(S):**

Consider receiving a briefing on customer satisfaction survey practices. [Requested by Director Peeples - 5/28/2008]

#### **STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE:**

Goal - Strong Public and Policymaker Support  
Initiative - Service Quality

Robust customer satisfaction is critical to attracting and retaining ridership. Customer satisfaction surveys provide valuable feedback about rider perceptions, offering insight into where the District excels and what areas need improvement to ensure high levels of customer satisfaction.

#### **BUDGETARY/FISCAL IMPACT:**

There is no immediate budgetary impact associated with this briefing item.

#### **BACKGROUND/RATIONALE:**

Robust and responsive customer satisfaction is critical to attracting and retaining ridership and ensuring ongoing support. Customer satisfaction surveys help gauge rider satisfaction and provide insight on necessary improvements. These benefits have made customer satisfaction surveying a common practice among businesses in all industries, including transit agencies.

While AC Transit has conducted surveys on rider demographics, perceptions of service-area riders and non-riders, and a multitude of service-related surveys, the District does not have an established practice of executing customer satisfaction surveys.

The goal of this report is to brief the AC Transit Board of Directors on current customer satisfaction survey practices in the transit industry and provide alternatives to the standard practices. This report will guide the creation of a new board policy which will govern customer satisfaction surveying at the District.

#### **Abstract**

Research for this report delved into customer satisfaction surveying practices at numerous transit agencies, transit-focused publications and databases, and practices in other industries. Most transit agencies utilize in-person intercept surveys; however, this approach has challenges such as time and cost. There are opportunities to combat these challenges with modifications or pursuing alternative paths such as focused or digital surveying; these options each possess a unique set of challenges. Based on the research conducted, staff recommends pursuing a customer satisfaction surveying program which features a complementary selection of techniques that will maximize effectiveness while minimizing cost.

### **Research Methodology**

Staff conducted extensive research to ensure this report reflects current transit industry practices and offers some innovative approaches for consideration.

A thorough peer review of customer satisfaction surveying programs from eighteen transit agencies across the globe was completed. The transit agencies surveyed include the top nine agencies in the United States of America as reported in the 2019 National Transit Database (NTD) Annual Report, six agencies that operate in the San Francisco Bay Area, and four international agencies.

Additionally, literature and academic papers listed in the Transport Research International Documentation database were reviewed as well as resources from the American Public Transportation Association, Transit Cooperative Research Program, and other transit-focused organizations.

### **Research Findings**

Most transit agencies utilize in-person intercept surveys but there is a range of practices used for implementation. A summary of practices in key areas are as follows:

#### *Survey Frequency*

Of the agencies researched, eight offer a customer satisfaction survey multiple times a year, three offer a survey annually, three survey every two years, one surveys every five years, and three agencies do not offer a customer satisfaction survey on a regular basis.

#### *Methodology*

For agencies that offer regular customer satisfaction surveys, multilingual surveys are standard in the United States, and surveys are distributed on board (six agencies), digitally (three agencies), via telephone (two agencies), or through some combination of these channels (four agencies). Nearly all agencies seek to secure a statistically significant sample that is representative of the full rider population. However, some agencies choose to focus solely on a particular segment of their rider population or conduct additional surveying which targets a particular segment (or segments). Additionally, more than half of the agencies researched contract with independent research firms to conduct their survey.

#### *Topics Covered*

Every agency offers tailored survey questions but there is overlap in the topics that most surveys cover including:

- Overall satisfaction
- On-time performance

- Availability of information
- Level of service
- Transfers
- Accessibility
- Fare details
- System cleanliness
- Safety
- Riding behavior
- Demographic information

### *Results Sharing*

Staff also found varying trends in how results are shared among agencies that offer regular customer satisfaction surveys. Four agencies make a report of the results available online, four agencies share a portion of the results online, three agencies offer a dashboard of the results that allow visitors to manipulate the data, three agencies do not offer the results easily accessible online, and one agency provides a report of the results in addition to offering the raw survey data for download.

### **Alternative Surveying Options**

As referenced previously, most transit agencies utilize in-person intercept surveys with random sampling to help ensure results are representative of the target audience. These in-person intercept surveys involve statistically representative sampling and collection plans to be developed, in-person surveying conducted, paper responses digitally input, and only then is the data analyzed and a report compiled. Therefore, these surveys are labor intensive, necessitate a delay between data collection and analysis, and are costly.

In response to the cost and lengthy timeframe needed for the standard in-person intercept surveys of representative rider samples, there are alternative paths that could meet the District's customer satisfaction surveying objectives. These options include:

#### *Digital Surveying*

Surveys could be conducted online with traffic driven through a variety of District channels. Historically, the population for respondents to digital surveys is not representative of the District's ridership population.

#### *Self-Serve Surveying*

To limit personnel costs, the District could offer onboard surveys in a format that could be scanned by optical mark recognition and image scanners or through installing onboard feedback platforms which provide immediate digital results. These options would likely limit the length of the survey and the types of questions that could be asked.

#### *Untrained In-Person Surveying*

Another option to limit personnel costs: AC Transit could solicit volunteers, leverage a firm consisting of non-professional surveyors, or contract with individuals at a minimum-wage rate to perform the intercept surveying. Alternatively, AC Transit could partner with a Market Research course at a local college or university to conduct the customer satisfaction survey as a semester-long project.

***Focused Surveying***

There are two ways to implement focused surveying. The first is to use a non-probability sampling method to select a sample which can be accessed in a cost-effective manner. This might mean restricting the surveying sample to those bus lines with a certain ridership threshold, or only surveying during a certain time period. Another option is to use a probability sampling method to generate a sample which is too small to have statistical power but would still provide useful insights into rider satisfaction.

**ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES:**

The main advantages of conducting an in-person intercept survey with random sampling are the ability to ensure a statistically significant sample, the ability to reach riders that might otherwise be difficult to reach, and the benefit of professionally trained interviewers to provide survey assistance and better ensure that the riders complete the survey.

As discussed, the major disadvantages of in-person intercept surveys include the large recurring costs and lag from survey collection to reporting on results.

All alternative options have the advantage of being more cost-effective than professional, large scale in-person intercept surveying of a representative sample and could offer the additional benefits of speed and convenience.

The major disadvantage to these options is the increased opportunity to produce certain biases and errors in the survey data. Digital surveying, self-serve surveying, and focused surveying introduce selection biases that would render unrepresentative samples. Untrained in-person surveying increases the possibility of selection and response bias due to the increased likelihood of improper surveying technique. It also increases the possibility of non-sampling errors such as introducing incorrect or false data into the survey results.

However, there are ways to mitigate some of these biases and the intent of the survey may lessen the potential detrimental impact of some of these biases.

**ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS:**

An alternative path is not to implement any customer satisfaction survey program. Staff does not recommend this due to the importance of customer satisfaction surveying that has been shared earlier in this report.

**PRIOR RELEVANT BOARD ACTION/POLICIES:**

None

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Charts of Research Findings

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