Milwaukee County Transit System: Semi-Annual Quality Measurement Survey

Summary:

The Milwaukee County Transit System conducts the “Semi-Annual Quality Measurement Survey” in April and October to assess riders’ opinions of the transit system. The survey identifies specific areas for quality measurement and profiles riders. The survey is used to identify concerns and areas for improvement.

Description:

The Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) started to conduct surveys to identify ridership concerns and areas of improvement about seven years ago. The questions related to the Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC) were added to the “Semi-Annual Quality Measurement Survey” about five years ago. Mr. Joseph Caruso (Marketing Director for MCTS) introduced the idea of conducting surveys of the ridership.

The Quality Measurement Survey is used to measure over thirty different characteristics of the MCTS riders, with emphasis on two issues: 1) identify specific areas of responsibility and areas of quality measurement (e.g., bus cleanliness, timely maintenance, addressing survey responses) and 2) on-going profiling of ridership for monitoring basic demographic as well as use characteristics such as trip purpose, form of fare payment, frequency of use, etc.

Surveys are conducted twice a year, in October and April, using a random dial telephone survey. A sample of 400 households is used for the survey. The survey is conducted in April and October to avoid biases of special event riders in the summer and weather biases in the winter. Usually, regular riders are used for the survey. However, in April 2003, a comparable 400 households of non-riders were also surveyed to get information on potential new riders.

Milwaukee already had a survey in place when JARC was introduced. After the introduction, MCTS added questions to satisfy JARC reporting requirements. Over the years, other changes were made to the survey. Some questions were dropped and new ones were added to the survey.
User Assessment

Customers:

The data (feelings, opinions and experiences) are collected amongst a representative sample of adults 18 years old or older. Only adults who have used the transit system within the 30 days prior to the survey are questioned. For conducting the survey, it usually takes about 5 minutes for non-riders and about 5-10 minutes for riders. With a 15% rate of return, one needs to call 100 people to get 15 completed rider surveys. Calls are made until 400 completed surveys have been obtained.

Agency:

The mission of the MCTS is to meet travel demands. The main goals of the MCTS are rider retention and to increase ridership. Often the question of who has the final authority of approving a new program will depend on the programs. Usually, the board has the final authority on policy, budget, and service level issues so that there isn’t any confusion.

However, the MCTS does not have to go to a political body for approval of internally related issues, where management teams usually have final authority. For example, with issues related to the shelters (e.g., ads in the bus shelters), the Board approved the concept, but MCTS has final authority on locations and other day-to-day matters.

The MCTS works with a professional market research firm, who compiles, interviews, reports and handles all of the arrangements (similar to a turn-key approach).

To attract more riders and rider loyalty, advertising is used inside and outside of the bus. Radio is also used for advertising. The MCTS is currently trying to get riders to use more of the weekly passes/tickets for rider loyalty. Sometimes, direct mail with coupon is used to target riders. For innovative fare related products, the MCTS uses its on-going personal sales effort and not use mass media.

Internally, attitude towards change and innovation is mixed. Some see the bigger picture but some don’t because innovations could change the functionality of jobs.
Technology Assessment:

Relative Benefits:

The benefits of doing the quality measurement survey are numerous. MCTS gets leading edge information on quality problems and can work quickly to correct them. MCTS can observe long-term trends by comparing data from past surveys. Characteristics of new or proposed features of service can be measured. For example, MCTS asked a question about rider familiarity and use of credit and debit card for daily purchases. Also, issue related questions could be asked on a limited basis if the timing of the survey is favorable (e.g., Did you vote in the last election).

Some of the advantages of MCTS are as follows: 1) wide coverage - transit service within walking distance of stops for 85% of the people and due to Milwaukee’s grid system layout, the transit system reaches most of the population, and 2) more service per capita than other systems and decreased costs because of the more ridership per capita.

![MCTS Ridership - How Passengers Are Served](image)

It seems that there aren’t any disadvantages but if there were one, it would have be to that the MCTS does not have a regional approach to transit service. A regional approach to transit service would help with design, marketing, and fares. Also, due to not having a dedicated source of local public funding, the transit system competes for funding with other local services (e.g., parks, law enforcement, cultural, etc.). (MCTS receives funding from federal, state, and local governments.)

Trial process:

Originally, the survey was conducted on a quarterly basis, but was eventually reduced to twice a year.
**Observability:**

After tracking the results, two things were evident: 1) could conduct the survey with equal reliability but only twice a year, and 2) improvements in the measured characteristics still showed up and therefore, concluded that it was a worthwhile effort to continue the surveys.

**Complexity:**

The Milwaukee County’s attitude toward change or innovation depends on what the constituents think and it varies. Overall, the county is favorable to transit. It is very open to new ideas (e.g., trolley, security change from the sheriff to a private agency, etc.). Changes are made because of the requests received. The feedback is a front-end process.

When implementing new programs, the involvement depends on the type of programs. For example, the university was involved with the implementation of the UPASS. Private groups do not necessarily get involved in the process, but as for the officials, it also depends. However, if transit changes or innovations affect the industrial park, the MCTS will try to get input from the industrial park tenants.

As for opposition to new ideas, that depends on the innovation. If innovation is related to route service, usually there is some opposition. If the innovation is related to management issues, usually there are no oppositions. Prior to the Semi-Annual Quality Measurement Survey, the MCTS had conducted the “market segmentation study.” Due to the prior research, no one really opposed the survey.

**Cost:**

Typically the two surveys cost between $8000 and $9000 each.

Currently there are four sources for funding MCTS operations. Passenger revenue contributes 34%, while the following public funding sources make up the balance: Federal 12%, State of Wisconsin 42%, and Milwaukee County property taxes 12%. The survey is funded under the general MCTS marketing budget.

**Consequences of Failure:**

If failure would happen, it would probably happen in one of two ways: either MCTS would stop doing the survey, or not focus on the right issues and characteristics. In either case, MCTS would probably lose riders and revenue by not responding sooner to problems. Also, MCTS would not have the rider profiles and other data that help with marketing and service planning.
For the implementation of the semi-annual quality measurement survey, there were no obstacles or hurdles. In fact, the MCTS had an easy time with the implementation process because some groundwork had already been done.

**Implementation Issues:**

The key is to look at the customers and the service design. When you increase ridership and retention, one enhances its reputation. Innovation isn’t always something new, but could be something improving. One of the important aspects of implementing changes or new programs is to have good personal communication. With a good level of personal communication, one could communicate with as many people as possible; whether they are servicing special events (e.g., Harley Davidson) or communicating details (e.g., 2003 Summerfest had 400,000+ one way trips). Another important aspect is to develop competencies to handle new things by hiring or training new or existing employees.

Transit systems are very dynamic, and change dynamics is an evolution developed and put to use (which is good for internal operations). Transit experience tells us that people desire convenience and reliability. Convenience means coverage and reliability connotes the system’s dependability (e.g., could people count on it?). If one of these is compromised, people will find other ways to get around.

The marketing efforts of the MCTS will depend on the change or the innovation. If the change or innovation is related to a new route, one will need to survey the people in the area that it serves. The Glendale Industrial Park is one of the examples of targeted marketing efforts. Planners surveyed the businesses in the Glendale Industrial Park to find out the most common shift start and end times. That information along with some information about where many of the employees would come from (in this case, central city Milwaukee) helped MCTS design the route and schedule. When it came time to promote the route, MCTS used the information about the central city workers to design advertising buys that reached them through local newspapers and targeted radio. In addition, MCTS provided the park’s employers with information kits that included posters, route guides, free ride coupons, sample employer newsletter articles, etc. for work site use. MCTS also had a breakfast meeting where representatives of all the employers were invited so MCTS could explain the new service and offer assistance in explaining it to their employees. Whatever the change or innovation, one needs to look at the target audience.

The MCTS not only serves the urbanized areas of Milwaukee County but there are forty small buses in the fleet to serve the suburban areas. Small buses are utilized for the suburban areas even though there is no cost differential in operating costs whether the system uses big or small buses. The difference is that the smaller buses are better accepted in the suburbs.

Transit systems should look at service delivery changes. Although some changes have not been so successful, it is important for people to look and address the service
delivery issues. For those cities without the grid systems, they should look at how better to provide transfer (bus) opportunities. As for the MCTS, it instituted the survey to gauge the riders and non-riders’ feelings and experiences, and to identify improvement areas. The MCTS also carried out pricing related innovations such as the commuter value pass and UPASS. One of the goals of MCTS is to get people to use transit for jobs and special events, especially during the summer months when there is a ridership decrease for fixed routes.

The Semi-Annual Quality Measurement Survey is just one of many innovations at the MCTS used to identify areas for improvements and meet travel demands in the county.

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