



10 MOST *Improved* Transit Systems



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ith a strong emphasis on customer service, this year's 10 Most Improved Transit Systems are proving that big budget marketing isn't everything.

Instead, communication in the form of better route maps, more personal attention and additional service has proven good for ridership at these agencies. At the **Fairfax Connector Bus System** in Fairfax, Va., negative customer service comments were down about 27% and ridership was up more than 11%, much of which can be credited to customer surveys done by the agency.

This year's Top 10 proves the importance of maintaining good customer service. See how reaching out to passengers translates to an increase in ridership.

By METRO Staff

The **Palm Tran Connector** in West Palm Beach, Fla., needed to reinvent itself to regain the confidence of its riders. And it did so in part by improving scheduling and service delivery.

Many of this year's Top 10 have seen vast improvements in their demand response services, achievements they were able to accomplish in partnership with rider coalitions. Read on to see how these agencies were able to rally their riders through good customer service.

The Top 10 were chosen from entries submitted by readers via our Website, www.metro-magazine.com.



Improved on-time performance and a new driver hiring program increased MTA's ridership by 5.8% in the past year.

Metropolitan Transit Authority Nashville, Tenn.

It wasn't rocket science that boosted funding and ridership numbers for Nashville's **Metropolitan Transit Authority** (MTA) — it was just good old-fashioned communication.

For the past 10 years, the MTA faced cutbacks and a reduction of services, forcing it to operate one of the oldest bus fleets in the state without proper funding. The MTA has since turned things around with a new communications campaign extolling the benefits of public transit. It's directed at elected officials, community leaders and the chamber of commerce.

The MTA's campaign presentations focused on air quality and congestion issues, as well as the need for newer vehicles. "We've got buses that should have been retired 12 years ago," says MTA CEO **Paul J. Ballard**. "That really hit home," he says of the campaign.

Another key point centered on the MTA's level of service, which was far behind comparable cities. "This is the state capital. It needs to be a far higher level of service," he says.

Getting the word out about system benefits has given the MTA the most support it has ever received in terms of funding. "This fiscal year we received a 20% increase in our operating budget and the capital budget is 10 times the amount the government has ever given the MTA before," Ballard says.

The MTA has also been more aggressive in its search for alternative revenue sources. "We've been successful in getting federal grants and we are also looking to private institutions such as universities for partnership opportunities," Ballard says.

With its new operating budget, the MTA placed an order for 25 new buses to replace existing vehicles. The new low-floor 40-foot vehicles, to be manufactured by **Gillig Corp.**, will include electronic fareboxes and multi-colored destination signs.

Another important issue tackled by the MTA was improving on-time performance of buses. This new focus led to a 5.8% ridership increase in the past year.

Ballard also credits a new hiring program for MTA's improved passenger numbers. "In the past we looked for people with a CDL. Now we look for people with a personality and we train them to drive."

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