

New York City Straphanger's Campaign

Case in Brief

The Straphangers' Campaign represents a bold attempt to influence the accountability, accessibility and performance of local government on behalf of its citizens.

Through the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), the Straphangers Campaign received a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to "launch a new in-depth effort to measure the quality of the transit service." The goal was to accurately report on the condition of the City's transit system and to draw media, public and governmental attention to the need to continue to invest in transit.

By the mid 1990s, ridership had plummeted to its lowest level since 1917. Many businesses cited poor transportation as the main reason for relocating from New York City. An editorial in the New York Times on October 5, 1995 seemed to summarize the sentiment at the time: "Then the near-ruin of local mass transit was taken as a metaphor for the decline and fall of the City itself. But New York did not fall, and thanks to a \$20 billion rebuilding plan, the subways got better. Now, it seems the battle must be fought all over again."

In their application to the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the NYPRIG wrote, "It is to hold the Transit Authority accountable by a sophisticated range of measures – and to communicate that information to the public in lively and meaningful ways."

The Straphangers Campaign has developed a measure of how riders rate their subway lines. The Straphangers Campaign has also collected data from transit officials and all data is presented in a clear and accessible format. A panel of thirty-eight transit experts also completed questionnaires by prioritizing certain aspects of the subway and bus service. This information was compiled for use in two sets of reports: one based on a review of official transit statistics and the other, based on NYPIRG's own field studies.

The first report under this Sloan project was released in 1997, profiling New York City's twenty major subway lines on six key official measures of service, including the amount of scheduled service, the chance of getting a seat during the most congested periods, the cleanliness of the cars and the adequacy of the announcements. Another twenty-one page report highlighted the state of the bus system. These two sets of reports represented the most comprehensive review by any non-governmental organization of the performance of a major public transportation system. They achieved two goals. First, they provided a solid baseline for comparing subway service in the future. And, second, they gave riders, communities and officials information they would need to press the transit authority for better service.

The Straphangers Campaign's work generated substantial media coverage. In particular, the comparative value assigned to each of the twenty subway lines evaluated enabled riders to make decisions about those lines that they frequented, i.e, what percentage of the full value of a token had been achieved. According to the 1998 report, riders just wanted to know how their lines performed. Do their trains break down more or less often than the average for New York City

subways? Is there a better or worse chance of getting a seat? How clean are the subway cars? Do the trains come more or less often? Do the trains arrive irregularly or with few gaps in service? How good or bad are the announcements?

Recently, the Straphangers Campaign concluded the following about the subway system:

- Subway cars grew dirtier and announcements poorer. The findings on announcements and dirt mirror independent surveys by the Straphangers Campaign
- There was a slightly greater chance of getting a seat during rush hour. However, the report probably underestimated the impact of recent increases in ridership.
- Car breakdowns occurred less often. However, on a majority of lines, car breakdowns increased, although any improvement to the system was due to large improvements on several lines.
- There were great disparities in how subway lines performed as measured in response to questions posed by riders

Overall, the Straphangers Campaign has found that riders simply want short waits, regular and reliable service, a chance for a seat, a clean subway car and clear announcements.

Although the Straphangers Campaign encountered a number of obstacles, including limited access to transit officials, they stepped up efforts to bring “real time” information to the public. An interactive website has also been established.

Written by G.L.A. Harris and Marc Holzer. For more information, visit the Straphangers website at www.straphangers.org. Reprinted with permission from the PA TIMES, monthly newspaper of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), www.aspanet.org.