

STRAPHANGERS CAMPAIGN

Background

In 1996, the founder of the Straphangers Campaign, Marilyn Ondrasik, and the Campaign's parent organization, the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), applied to the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to "launch a new in-depth effort to measure the quality of the transit service." New York city's metropolitan transit system was at a critical juncture.

NYPIRG has been an advocate and well respected voice for New York City's nearly seven million subway and bus riders since 1979. The Straphangers website, at www.straphangers.org, describes how NYPIRG evolved as an organization, including achievements in mass transit:

- Before 1947: Transit activism before the Straphangers Campaign. Pressure from transit riders and workers kept the fare at a nickel between 1904 and 1947.
- Graffiti on subway cars convinced NYPIRG to start the Straphangers Campaign in 1979. That year, trains broke down every 8,000 miles on average. By 1991, trains were twelve times more reliable at 96,000 miles between mechanical delays. Students active in NYPIRG helped lead the efforts to turn around the system
- In 1985 transit became an election issue. The Straphangers Campaign organized a "March for Decent Transit" across the Brooklyn Bridge and asked that the candidates for Mayor greet Campaign volunteers and staff at the Manhattan end. This march featured a human train spitting out paper bolts and nuts, as well as a contingent of former Miss Subways and road runners for transit.
- In 1986, 1993 and 1995, "If you want our thanks, fix the subway, " became a rallying cry as advocates won \$24 million in transit rebuilding funds.

A case study by NYPIRG, entitled *Lessons Learned: Measurement of Transit Performance*, describes the Straphangers Campaign's work in monitoring and measuring the performance of New York City's subway and bus systems. Those systems account for one in four daily public transportation trips taken in the United States.

Reports

Between 1979 and 1995, the Straphangers Campaign produced some 20 reports on transit service, including an annual scoreboard on the "state of the subways." The goal was to accurately report on the condition of the system and to draw media, public and governmental attention to the need to continue to invest in transit.

The Straphangers Campaign, begun as a result of support from the Fund for the City of New York and the New York Foundation, and with funding from a grant by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, has generated more than fifty reports on subway and bus services since its inception.

In the 1980s, given that ridership had plummeted to its lowest level since 1917 and businesses relocating from the City often cited poor transportation as a main reason, citizen perception of the City of New York's subway system was negative. In fact, given the extensive media coverage during the period of its campaign, the Straphangers Campaign has managed to portray the City's transportation system as woefully lacking in reliability and timeliness, cleanliness and user friendliness. The *Daily News* has termed the manner in which passengers must contend with such services as packing sardines at "crush hour." Thus, the Straphangers Campaign recognized

the need to publish annual reports of the New York City's transportation system in an ongoing effort to inform riders and create positive pressures for change.

For example, in the 1998 annual report of the subway system (published in 1999) the Straphangers Campaign tabulated its findings on responses by riders. Riders typically want to know how their line performs. Do their trains break down more or less often than average for New York's 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 trains arrive irregularly or with few gaps in service? How good or bad are the announcements?

For that same year, in the *State of the Subways* report, the Straphangers Campaign concluded that:

- Subway cars grew dirtier and announcements poorer. The findings on announcements and dirt mirrored independent surveys.
- There was slightly a greater chance of getting a seat during rush hour. However, the report likely underestimated the impact of then recent increases in ridership. The only available figures for crowding were taken from a one-day count conducted in fall of 1997 following the start of free subway-to-bus transfers and prior to unlimited-ride passes and bulk purchase discounts.
- Car breakdowns occurred less often. However, on a majority of lines, eleven of the twenty, car breakdowns increased. The improvement for the whole system was due largely to significant improvements in several lines.

- There were great disparities in how subway lines performed as measured by rider responses.

This 1998 report, however, represents a mixed picture of how New York City's subways fared.

According to the report, and utilizing "line ratings" of the value of a ride against a full fare benchmark of \$1.50:

1. For the fourth consecutive year, for instance, the best subway line was the number 7. Its line rating is \$1.05. Its cars broke down much less often than average and it performed above average with fewer gaps in service or bunching together of trains.
2. The worst subway line is the number 5 with a line rating of \$0.60. Line number 5 performed below average on at least four measures.
3. The subways grew more crowded in the last year. A rider's chance of getting a seat during rush hour has decreased given the 17 percent increase in ridership in three years.
4. There has been no improvement in scheduled times between trains during rush hour.
5. Results for the passenger environment were mixed. Subways cars grew significantly cleaner:
 - Cleanliness: Sixteen of the twenty routes grew cleaner while four grew dirtier.
 - Announcements: Eleven of the twenty lines provided fewer correct and audible announcements.
6. Measures of reliability were mixed. Subway cars broke down less often but regularity of service was difficult to predict:
 - Breakdowns: Sixteen of the twenty lines experienced fewer delays due to mechanical problems

- Regularity: Eleven of the twenty lines grew more irregular with greater gaps in service and more bunching of trains
7. The most improved line is the M, which was tied for the worst line during the previous year.
 8. Three lines, the number 5, C and N, had the largest drop in performance, extending from breakdowns due to mechanical problems to irregularity of schedule and overcrowding.
 9. There were great disparities in how subway lines performed:
 - Cleanliness: The N was the cleanest
 - Amount of scheduled service: The 6 had the most scheduled service
 - In-car announcements: The A and Q had the highest rates of adequate announcements

In the annual report for 1999, the Straphangers Campaign concluded that riders simply wanted short waits, regular and reliable service, a chance for a seat, a clean subway car and clear announcements.

Contrasting the report for 1999 with the findings from the fifth *State of the Subways* annual report from the last half of 2001, the key findings are as follows:

1. The best subway line in the city is the Q, with a line rating of \$1.25. The Q replaces the winner for the previous four consecutive years, the number 7. The Q ranked high because its cars break down the least in the system and it arrives with much greater regularity than most lines.

2. The worst subway line is the C, with a line rating of \$0.65. It replaced the number 5 as the worst line. The C performed below average on four measures: amount of service, chances of getting a seat during rush hour, car breakdowns and adequate subway car announcements.
3. The subways improved in the last year. The line ratings went up on fourteen of nineteen subway lines. Ratings declined only for two and remained the same for three.
4. Why the overall improvement? The subways grew slightly more regular, had much fewer breakdowns and cleaner cars. However, other key factors remained unchanged – amount of service and chance of getting a seat at peak periods, and announcements grew worse.

Regularity of service improved from 77 percent to 79 percent. The distance that subway cars travel on average without breakdowns leapt from 86,843 miles in 1999 to 110,586 miles in 2000; and 85 percent of subway cars were clean in 2000 as compared to 75 percent in 1999.
5. The subways, however, remained crowded. A rider's chance of getting a seat during the most crowded rush hour periods continued at 28 percent, down from 31 percent two years prior. Ten lines grew more crowded, while nine lines grew less crowded. There was also no improvement in scheduled times between trains during rush hour. Rush hour crowding remained intolerably high because service lagged behind exploding ridership. MTA officials admitted that subway ridership increased 29 percent between 1996 and 2001, but was met with only an 11 percent increase in service, with much of that targeted to nights and weekends. This lag was due to two factors: ungenerous crowding standards set by transit officials and a lack of capacity, including a shortage of subway cars and an aging system. In June, 2001, five former city transportation commissioners called for more subway service, including no more than a four-minute scheduled wait on any subway line and a guaranteed seat during off-peak hours.

6. Results for the passenger environment were mixed. Subway cars grew cleaner in the prior year, but announcements were poorer. Both mirror trends found in independent surveys by the Straphangers Campaign:
 - Cleanliness: Four out of twenty lines grew cleaner while six grew dirtier. System-wide, the percentage of subway cars with clean seats and floors increased from 75 percent to 85 percent. This improvement came after transit officials restored more than two hundred subway car cleaners who were cut in 1994.
 - Announcements: Fifteen of the twenty lines provided fewer correct and understandable announcements. Five improved, while one remained the same. System-wide, the percentage of cars with correct and understandable announcements declined from 60 percent to 48 percent
7. Measures of reliability improved. Subway cars broke down less often and were more regular, with fewer bunched trains or gaps in service:
 - Breakdowns: Seventeen of twenty lines experienced fewer delays due to mechanical problems, while three lines had a greater breakdown rate.
 - Regularity: Eleven of the twenty lines grew more regular with fewer gaps in service and bunching. Five worsened and four remained the same.
8. The most improved line was the D. Its line rating went from \$0.85 to \$1.20. The D showed improvement on four measures: greater regularity, lower car breakdowns, less crowding and cleaner cars. The D more than doubled the distance its cars travelled between breakdowns, going from 114,743 miles between mechanical failures to 244,684 miles. Announcements grew worse on the line and its scheduled service remained the same. The last measure, amount of service, remained the same.

9. Only two lines declined, the number 7 and J/Z. The line rating for the number 7 declined from \$1.05 to \$0.95 and the J/Z dropped from \$0.95 to \$0.85. The number 7 line arrived more crowded, broke down more frequently and provided poorer announcements. However, cleanliness on the number 7 improved and there was no change in the amount of service. The J/Z line was more crowded and provided poorer announcements.
10. There are greater disparities in how subway lines perform. For example, the Q had the best record on delays caused by car mechanical failures: once every 276,476 miles. The G line had the worst, experiencing breakdown delays four times as often: once every 65,477 miles. The same disparities among lines could be seen for all measures:
- Cleanliness: The M and D were the cleanest lines, with 6 percent of their cars having moderate or heavy dirt while 32 percent of cars on the A, the dirtiest line, had moderate or heavy dirt.
 - Chance of getting a seat: The best chance of getting a seat was on the B line, where the riders had a 37 percent chance of getting a seat. The N ranked worst as riders had only a 19 percent chance of getting a seat.
 - Amount of scheduled service: The number 6 line had the most scheduled service, with three-minute intervals between trains during rush hour. Of the nineteen lines rated, the C ranked worst with nine to ten-minute intervals between trains. The G provided even less service with scheduled intervals of ten minutes. It was not given a rating due to non-comparable data on crowding.
 - Regularity of service: For the fourth consecutive year, the line with the greatest regularity was the M. It adhered to its scheduled intervals of service 91 percent of the time. The line experienced significant gaps in service or bunching of trains only 9 percent of the time.

The least regular line was the 1/9, which performed with regularity only 64 percent of the time.

- In-car announcements: The E line had the highest rate of adequate announcements made in its subway cars, at 61 percent. The number 4 and L were the worst, at 41 percent

State of the System

At the time of NYPIRG's founding, New York City's transit system was near collapse. *Lessons Learned* underscored decades of under-investment in the system's capital needs that had resulted in severe unreliable service with a record breakdown rate and a rash of derailments and fires that triggered a major investigation by federal safety officials.

In their application to the Sloan Foundation, the Straphangers Campaign argued that: "City and state government have [recently] cut hundreds of millions of dollars in transit operating funds; billions more in repair funds are at risk. The Transit Authority promises that it will do more with less. Can it accomplish this? The only serious way to judge their performance is to measure it, objectively and fairly. Will transit move ahead or backward? It is critical that the answer be "yes," both for the City's economy and for the public perception of government's ability to continue to improve services. Many are skeptical of the transit system's ability to survive the current round of severe cuts without grave damage. 'For New Yorkers who remember the breakdowns, delays and graffiti-covered subways in the early 1980s, [the cuts] have a familiar ring,' The *New York Times* editorialized on October 5, 1995. '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.’ What’s the most effective way to make sure all the past decade’s hard-won progress is not lost? It’s 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 *Daily News*, on March 25, 2001, described the overcrowding of the current subway system as “translating into hellishly overcrowded trains along the entire 656 mile long system.” Part of the problem, according to the article, was the popularity of using the subways. The previous year’s ridership level was the highest since 1964. And in 2001, the number of straphangers was expected to increase to 1.435 billion. Annual increases were most pronounced in the prior three years, boosted by the introduction of the MetroCard, free bus-to-subway transfers and weekly and monthly passes. Ridership rose 6.3 percent in 1998, 6.6 percent in 1999 and 7.9 percent in 2000.

Line Ratings

When most transit riders think about the subways, they think about the specific lines they take. In developing profiles, the major steps taken were to: (1) decide which aspects of service were important to riders; (2) obtain and understand relevant and useful data from transit officials; and (3) develop a clear and accessible format for presentation. The latter was advanced by

developing a “line rating” that allowed ranking of the subway lines and the summarizing of data in one number. The Straphangers Campaign established the following series of objectives:

- Get information to the riding public in an easy-to-understand manner.
- Give communities ammunition to fight for better service.
- Develop baselines to measure transit’s progress or decline.
- Hold responsible transit managers accountable.

In the *State of the Subways Report*, Summer 2000, profiles were developed for each subway line as a way to rate those lines by highlighting the following information for public view via the Internet:

- Scheduled frequency during the morning and evening rush hours.
- On time rating – How often trains are on time.
- Breakdown rates--Repairs or miles between car breakdowns.
- Seat Availability - Likelihood of getting or not getting a seat during rush hour.
- Cleanliness – Percentage of subway cars that are clean.
- Announcements – Clarity and frequency of announcements.

The profiles and ratings were developed with the cooperation of the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the expert counsel of advisors at the University Transportation Research Center at City College and peer feedback from a wide range of commentators.

Annual reports of the subway system, therefore, give riders periodic assessments of how the system fares. Furthermore, riders need a report card for several reasons. First, they want information on the quality of trips. That is clearly what public opinion polls conducted by transit officials show. “Customers have interest in knowing how their line, as well as the overall system, is doing,” according to the MTA New York City Transit telephone survey of 950 riders in 1998. The poll found that 55 percent of the customers wanted service information to be posted at subway stations. Currently riders on ten out of the twenty major subway lines have scheduled afternoon rush hour service of six minutes or more. That compares poorly with other cities such as Paris, Moscow, London and Tokyo, where trains come every one-and-half to four minutes during rush hour.

Second, annual reports are a gauge to determine where the subway system is headed. The findings, however, told a mixed story. According to the Straphangers Campaign, the subways are clearly struggling to handle the flood of new riders attracted by fare discounts and a solid local economy. Both have resulted in a staggering increase in ridership. There are a million more riders each weekday now crowding onto packed City subways and buses than there were just two years before. Daily City transit ridership increased from 3.7 million in March of 1997 to 4.3 million in March of 1999.

Finally, annual reports aim to help riders and communities win better service and hold transit managers more accountable. Often riders and neighborhood groups say that either their line has gotten worse, is the most crowded or that particular subway lines are better than others. For riders and transit officials receiving poor levels of service, the annual reports assist in making

improvements, ranging from increases in service to major repairs. For those on better subway lines, the reports highlight areas of improvement or spark debate or agreement on what constitutes decent service.

The Straphangers Campaign acknowledges that there are serious challenges in providing more attractive levels of service, such as the limits of old technology signal systems and the lack of availability of subway cars.

In the short run, however, there are many lines where service could be added, a strategy the Straphangers Campaign feels that transit officials should pursue. Costs are manageable, and transit officials agreed with the assessment of the New York City Independent Budget Office that city-wide four-minute headway for ninety minutes of the peak rush hour would only cost between \$30 and \$40 million annually. In the long run, however, the MTA should be making the capital investments that would permit more frequent service.

As indicated above, the Campaign hopes that the many New Yorkers who care about the City's transit system will use the reports to hold transit managers accountable. To facilitate that accountability, the Campaign lists the telephone number for the superintendent responsible for each subway line.

According to *Lessons Learned*, the Campaign produced two sets of reports: one based on a review of official transit statistics; the other, on that organization's own field studies. In

producing these reviews and surveys, the Straphangers Campaign began with several advantages, given their previous sixteen years of experience with New York City.

First, the organization understood the practical challenges in conducting empirical surveys, from recruiting surveyors to the difficulties in securing meaningful sample sizes. Second, in using official transit statistics, they benefited from a decade of prior work to improve quality and reliability of this information. Along with other transit groups and a state agency, the Straphangers Campaign has helped to develop new, more meaningful measures and more reliable data gathered by the City's transit agency.

In developing the profiles, measures that were important to riders were assessed in two ways. First, a questionnaire was distributed to a panel of thirty-eight transit experts, requesting that they prioritize aspects of subway and bus service. And, second, "importance ratings" were obtained from New York City and Connecticut's own extensive and ongoing polling of riders. That polling, for instance, gave more weight to the amount of scheduled service than to how regularly trains actually arrived. This was reflected in the final report formula for ranking lines. Crime ranked high as a concern for riders. However, neither New York City nor Connecticut measures crime in a way that can be broken down on a line-by-line basis.

The Campaign decided not to use one measure of service prepared by the transit agency. While the TA's on-time performance measure is a solid and credible measure of service, it is conducted only for overnight service. The Campaign believed that it would be of limited interest to the majority of riders.

In the *State of the Subways* Report, Summer 2000, officials at the MTA reviewed the line profiles and ratings and concluded that: “Although it could be easily debated as to which indicators are most important to the transit customer, we felt that the measures that you selected for the profiles are a good barometer in generally representing a route’s performance characteristics...Further, the format of your profiles..is clear and should cause no difficulty in the way the public interprets the information.”

Bus Service

In 1998, the Straphangers Campaign released its first report on bus service. The twenty-one-page report was considerably different in approach from the “state of the subways” report. This reflected the available data, which in many cases was not maintained on a route-by-route basis. Additionally, the bus report was released in the midst of a public debate on the adequacy of service in light of major increases in ridership following decades of decline. The Campaign brainstormed the scope of the study, assessed available data and decided to make reductions in bus service over the last decade a major focus of the report.

In May 2001, transit officials made major changes in how several of the indicators were derived. The Campaign unsuccessfully urged the TA to reconsider its new methodologies because of concerns about the fairness of these measures and the loss of comparability with past indicators. Since transit officials rejected the request to recalculate measures back to 1996 in line with their adopted changes, some historical comparability may have been lost for future State of the Subways reports.

These two sets of reports—subway and bus--represent the most comprehensive review by any non-governmental organization of the performance of a major public transportation system. The reports met two key goals: one, they provided a solid baseline for comparing subway service in the future; and two, they gave riders, communities and officials data with which to press for better service.

Making Transit a Priority

In “Unclogging New York: A Blueprint for Better City Transportation” (sponsored by four former New York City Mayors and Commissioners of the city’s Department of Transportation along with Mayor Giuliani, the Transportation Commissioner, and twenty-one other city organizations including the NYPIRG’s Straphangers Campaign) the next Mayor was asked to make transit service a key priority.

Specifically, the “unclogging” plan (See Exhibit G-1) called for the next Mayor and City Council to dramatically increase riders’ mobility, improve economic competitiveness, improve the environment and enhance the quality of riders’ lives through the following plan for better transportation:

1. Win real progress on major transit and rail projects essential to the City’s future – and press for a “fix it first” policy for bridges and roads. The City must demonstrate leadership by increasing and dedicating transportation-related revenues to investment in our subways, buses, highways and bridges.

- Specifically for transit, state and regional officials have pledged to move ahead on a host of vital new transit projects. The next Mayor should work to insure that they keep their commitment, including a Second Avenue Subway, linking the Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal, rail access to airports and getting the commuter railroads to better serve City neighborhoods. Many of these promised advances face an uncertain future given shaky financing. The next Mayor should get a real commitment from the state by challenging it with matching City funds and fighting for new sources of funding such as re-instituting the commuter tax dedicated to transportation.

2. Press for much more transit service, less crowding and faster and more reliable trips:

- The City should demand that there be no more than a four-minute scheduled rush hour wait on any of the City's twenty subway lines and that every rider must be able to get a seat during the off peak hours. Again, more service is desperately needed to meet the increasing ridership demands. New York City has the slowest buses in America. As a matter of civic pride, the next Mayor should end the City's last place finish and give buses the priority they deserve on City streets by expanding and redesigning exclusive bus lanes and increasing enforcement to discourage cars from blocking them. The City should keep pressing the MTA and other bus fleets operating in the City to reduce diesel bus emissions and have the Long Island Rail Road and Metro North provide more service at lower cost to city riders.

3. Lead by example to reduce congestion and improve transportation decision-making.

- Require that top officials take transit regularly and cut thousands of unnecessary parking permits for government employees, especially in Manhattan.

- Promote TransitCheck, which gives tax breaks to commuters. Only 250,000 area employees are enrolled in this cost-savings program out of a pool of more than five million. Urge City businesses to sign up and provide all City employees with a range of fare options.
- Make transportation a priority. Appoint the Commissioner of the City's Department of Transportation to the MTA board of directors. Coordinate all related transportation and planning efforts through a sub-cabinet chaired by the head of DOT.
- Increase public confidence in the City's DOT by improving the basic services that the agency provides from speeding installation of safety signals to fixing potholes to improving service provided by bus companies overseen by the City.

The sponsors of the unclogging plan urge this commonsense blueprint to unclog and calm the City streets, ease horrendous crowding on subways and buses and move critical freight. The sponsors of the plan include such groups as major business, labor, environment, transit and civic interests. All share a deep concern for the City's increasingly inadequate and antiquated transportation system. It should then be the job of the Mayor to provide direction and ensure that the City applies some of its energy to building a transportation system equal or better to the world's other great international cities

The funding from the Sloan Foundation supported the critical basics, including research capacity. The funding further provided an additional critical element – support to disseminate the results directly to the riders, both through advertisements in the subways and through a new website. That ability to reach and mobilize the riding public has always been key to the success of winning better transit.

Using the Internet

In 1999, the Straphangers Campaign decided to step up efforts to use the Internet to reach the riding public in “real time.” The goal was to increase the base of e-mail addresses in order to get a detailed sense of how riders would respond to information via the Internet, to the Straphangers Campaign’s findings and in demanding improvements in services.

The Straphangers Campaign’s old website was traditional in nature in the sense that it stressed the organization, its accomplishments, reports and views. It was useful especially to groups, officials and the media. However, the website did not have broad appeal to the greater riding public. And, while the website was periodically updated, it did not offer many compelling reasons to revisit often. As a result, and with the aid of a talented graphics artist and programmer, the website was reconfigured to be more dynamic and “stickier.” This is Internet jargon for a site that has a loyal following.

Web-based communication was viewed as having tremendous potential in getting performance measurement data directly to interested parties. The Campaign received almost 3,300 visitors to the website over a period of just 4 days, a majority of whom were referred from global e-mails.

In 2000, the Straphangers Campaign invested significant resources in restructuring the website which can be found at: www.straphangers.org. This also includes links to other websites relating to like issues.

The heart of the Straphangers Campaign strategy was to make the website rider-oriented. In addition to information on how individual lines perform, the website offers a range of appealing benefits to visitors. First, features such as “how to lower your fare” has direct links to information on cost saving transit programs. Second, visitors are able to find out exactly who to contact regarding responses to complaints about specific lines or types of problems. Third, visitors can sign up for a service where they receive weekly e-mails on diversions affecting their lines. And, finally, the website has information riders often want, such as train schedules.

The new site is interactive. Visitors can participate in opinion polls and make entries in a “rider diary.” An interactive map allows riders to view the street grid of the neighborhood around their subway destination, and an innovative page equipped with games, quizzes and contests. The Campaign also disseminates information to the public via flyers.

The initial response to the website was encouraging. In the first two weeks, the Campaign’s reached 20,000 individual visitors and had 80,000 hits. The e-mail database has doubled.

“Sylvia Sardine has become the new symbol for the problems experienced by riders in the City’s transit. The Campaign uses this link in the website as an avenue through which riders can complain about the system by e-mailing Governor Pataki at www.straphangers.org/crowding/howtosave.php. An on screen video entitled “*You Are Not Alone! Watch as Sylvia Sardine Starts Her Day!*” reflects riders’ frustrations.

Data Problems

Straphangers reports faced two challenges. First, for the “state of the subways” report, it was important to have information broken down for each of the City’s 20 subway lines. A key measure, how often a train experiences delays due to mechanical problems (known as the mean distance between failures (MDBF)), however, was only reported publicly by the model type of subway cars. These models were scattered among lines and changed regularly. Thus, a presentation to riders by model number was meaningless.

While transit authority officials advised the Campaign that the information was not divided by line, in a meeting a senior transit official said that such information was indeed broken down by line for analysis. Although the initial request for MDBF information citing the official’s comments was honored, when another request was made one year later, the Transit Authority termed the information “unavailable.”

Second, for a survey on subway stations, the Campaign decided to include the names of the individuals responsible for the upkeep of the stations-- the station managers. This would provide riders with information to contact the precise official with the power to improve subway stations. Although that information was requested in writing, the Campaign was told that the names would not be provided. Transit officials simply did not want to make station managers easily accessible to the public. A follow-up formal request was made, citing the Freedom of Information Act. After several months, the names and contact information were provided. However, when those numbers were contacted for verification, the information was significantly

unreliable. In the end, the Campaign settled for including the name and contact information for the system's chief stations officer.

The unreliability of the data was telling. It documented that a once vibrant program of putting an individual face on accountability for the running of a subway station had become moribund.

Finally, the Straphangers Campaign was unable to implement several field surveys due to the size of the system, with 7,400 daily weekday train trips; 203 bus routes and 20 subway lines; 6.4 million daily weekday riders; 10,000 subway cars and buses; and 468 subway stations. For instance, it was too daunting a task to evaluate the regularity of subway and bus service. Another transit group does a review of how evenly spaced trains are. But they acknowledged that their survey is only a snapshot and is not statistically significant.

Recently, in the opinion of the Campaign, transit officials proposed questionable performance indicators that would diminish the usefulness of the data. This also threatened to obliterate the historic baseline going back to 1995. The administration believed that the measures are not fair and portray the agency in a negative light.

Pressures Result in Change

As a result of the Campaign, New York City transit officials have:

- Added tens of millions of dollars to the transit service.
- Implemented new fare discounts, such as unlimited ride passes and free subway-bus transfers.

- Moved to modestly increase the size of the subway and bus fleets.
- Improved service on the lowest performance lines as per the two Straphanger Campaign's reports.
- Restored two-hundred car cleaners, resulting in cleaner subways.
- Established an agency task force to improve announcements.
- Replaced thousands of vandal-prone credit card phones with smart phones that automatically call in repairs.
- Reconstructed a subway line in Brooklyn and a subway station in the Bronx that were previously targets for closure.

The Straphangers Campaign was directly involved in the following:

- Helped write new laws allowing the public to speak at meetings of MTA board representatives and put non-voting rider and labor representatives on the board.
- Helped get a "trade-in" for transit of \$1.4 billion of Westway superhighway funds.
- Blocked plans to tear down subway newsstands and bar subway musicians and performers.
- Saved the Transit Museum and Philip's Saltwater Taffy in Coney Island from closure.
- Won creation of independent transit safety and management monitors.
- Led winning campaigns for unlimited ride passes and free subway-bus transfers.

One dramatic by-product of the improvements has been the 1.2 million more subway and bus riders per day than existed three years previously. While other factors played a major role, especially a strong local economy, the Straphangers Campaign reports directly contributed to increased ridership.

Unresolved Problems

In a report by the Campaign for 1999 entitled “Standing Still: New York City Transit Bus Service, A NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign State of the Buses Report, the overall bus service was cited as “lousy” and several key aspects even grew worse. Of the City’s 4,100 buses, the Straphangers Campaign found the following:

- On-time performance for buses was “a joke” and the scourge of bus bunching a “constant torment.” “Bus regularity,” the transit officials artful term for bus bunching or gaps in service, and on-time performance, remained at the same level as the previous year. This was a dismal four of ten buses on key routes arriving irregularly and off-schedule
- On the most regular routes, a shocking 60 percent of the buses arrived bunched together or with significant gaps in service. And 58 percent of the buses were off-schedule on the route with the worst on-time performance
- In 1999, buses broke down more than they did in 1998. While the decline was slight, the trend was disturbing. The average miles traveled between service interruptions caused by mechanical breakdowns decreased by 4 percent between 1998 and the first nine months of 1999. This drop followed four years of slow but steady improvement in the breakdown rate. The decline also came when recent bus purchases reduced the average age of the bus fleet from 1,315 buses that were twelve years old or older in 1997 to 600 in 1999.
- Worst still, buses were now breaking down far more often than they did in 1992, the best year for performance in the 1990s. The average number of miles traveled between service

interruptions caused by mechanical breakdowns declined by 41 percent, comparing the first nine months of 1999 with 1992.

- Over a twelve month period, the passenger environment deteriorated on two critical measures: Bus interiors grew filthier with the number of buses with no or light interior dirt falling sharply from 92 percent in 1998 to 80 percent in 1999. There were fewer understandable and correct announcements, dropping from 38 percent in 1998 to 34 percent in 1999. The Campaign described this as “an appalling level of performance.”
- Transit officials had fallen well short of their own goals. They promised to improve the breakdown rate for buses by 19 percent in 1999. Instead, the breakdown rate worsened by 4 percent. They pledged to improve regularity by 8 percent and on-time performance by 4 percent in 1999. Instead, these key indicators of service remained unchanged.

Like many riders, the Campaign is very frustrated by the quality of service documented by the above findings and by the daily reality of slow, irregular, crowded and dirty bus service. The Campaign report also reveals that New York City’s buses are the “slowest in the country.” In other major cities, buses cruise at an average of thirteen miles per hour. In New York City, they crawl at an average of eight miles throughout the City and at an excruciating six miles per hour in Manhattan, the worst record in the nation.

So, who is to blame? Responsibility, according to the Campaign, lies chiefly with officials at MTA. They have failed to add enough service to meet an enormous surge in ridership. There was an increase in ridership of 38 percent between October 1996 and October 1999, yielding an astonishing 662,000 more riders just on an average weekday. Yet, this increase was only met by

a 9 percent increase in service during the same period. The result: longer boarding times, slower speeds and more bus bunching as too few buses moved more people.

But transit officials deny that lack of service is a problem. They say that many routes had “available capacity to accommodate ridership increases” and that they have added enough service where it was needed. They also say that other bus systems have more crowding, although admitting that cities like London, Chicago and Philadelphia are far less crowded.

Transit officials also blame slow and erratic service on traffic congestion. “What’s going on is traffic, simply that. And there’s nothing much we can do about it,” said a spokesperson for New York City Transit with a shrug of the shoulders in explaining New York’s last place standing on bus speeds. “Wear sneakers,” he advised, with insensitivity, according to the Campaign, “worthy of Marie Antoinette.”

In the view of the Campaign, transit officials have simply failed to be vigorous and public advocates for higher street priority for buses as well as for far greater increases in service. Although the explosion in bus ridership should mean more clout for the bus system and more energy for new initiatives, transit officials have seemingly been moving as slowly as the buses they manage.

According to the Campaign, rather than plan optimistically for the future, transit officials have been timid. The business-led Regional Plan Association, for example, has criticized New York City Transit’s proposed five-year capital plan as falling 1,000 buses short of what is needed to

meet current ridership levels. New York City's Transit plans calls for an increase of only two percent in bus service between 2000 and 2004.

Rather than build on ridership gains by increasing service and reducing wait times, the Campaign claims that transit officials have pursued initiatives that are often a mixed blessing – and worse – for riders. These initiatives include splitting longer routes into shorter routes (requiring riders to transfer to complete trips); rerouting bus services to “avoid congested areas” (taking many riders away from where they really want to go); eliminating bus stops; and lengthening travel times to “improve” on-time performance on paper.

In the opinion of the Campaign, rather than offering detailed public proposals to press City Hall for new initiatives to speed buses on City streets, the transit officials have succumbed to bureaucratic inertia by accepting a few slow-moving pilot projects.

In 2000, the Campaign offered two recommendations aimed at seizing the momentum provided by the increase in ridership. They were:

1. The Board of the MTA should replace the current City bus Managers unless they achieve their stated goals to improve service by early 2001. While the Straphangers Campaign respects the hard work of the current managers, in 1999 these managers failed to meet their own goals for improving the current low level of basic service.

The current managers have again promised to improve bus performance in 2000. They say that by the end of the year buses will be breaking down 27 percent less, that there will be 10 percent less bunching and that on-time performance will improve by 65 percent.

The MTA board should put the managers on notice: They will be held accountable for their success or failure in achieving these goals. The board should direct the bus managers to produce a clear and ambitious blueprint of the steps required by both the Transit Agency and the City of New York.

The Mayor should commit the City to increasing the speed of the buses on its streets. It should be a matter of civic pride to end New York's last place bus speeds. The first step should entail issuing a blueprint for faster buses and then committing to specific goals for increasing bus speeds over the next five years. Here, the Mayor's leadership is critical, especially to hold traffic officials accountable.

2. The Straphangers Campaign renewed its call for such policies in its "Ten-Point Program for Better Bus Service"-- from building more exclusive bus lanes to moving and ending the use of diesel-fuel buses.

Conclusion

Any community considering a similar challenge to the ongoing one that the Campaign faces should recognize that a range of steps were critical to the project's success-- from canvassing

public opinion on what is important in public service to getting the resources and support to turn out credible reports.

One thing, however, that should be underscored is putting real time and energy into the presentation of data. It is a challenge to design a study and collect and analyze the data when one forgets that unless such information is accessible, people won't read and/or absorb it. Charts, graphs and ratings must be utilized.

An inherent challenge in gathering data is how to maintain a dialogue with public officials while releasing performance data that shows a need for improvement. While the Straphangers Campaign has always had a periodically charged relationship with transit officials, the constant stream of reports and attendant news and editorial coverage further strained communication. For example, the Campaign is no longer permitted to speak directly to transit middle managers without first obtaining permission of a senior aide to the president of the agency. This has affected the flow of information, ideas and understanding.

