Tweeting a complaint or suggestion, even posting one on Facebook, is old hat in the private sector. After all, you can use an app these days to, say, hail a ride on Uber, Lyft or Sidecar. But if you encounter a bad driver or surly ticket agent while riding public transportation, there’s no app for that (or an easy way to tweet directly at an agency, for that matter). Times are changing, though, and public transit agencies are finally catching up.

This past December, New Jersey Transit decided to send some of its front-line employees to get retrained in customer relations. Officials weren’t prompted by comments submitted through the usual online form, however. They were spurred to action by tweets and posts on Facebook. Employee behavior was a top issue on the agency’s social media dashboard.

The move is noteworthy. With 60,000 Twitter followers and another 43,000 friends on Facebook, NJ Transit has a fairly big social media audience. It’s not enough to use these tools to push out service alerts and arrival times anymore. Instead, Twitter, Facebook and other platforms have long-term strategic value as a monitoring tool that can help transit agencies improve how their systems run and increase the public’s trust in them.

“Transit providers can use aggregate mobile phone data and social media posts to improve system management,” Sarah Kaufman, a Digital Manager with New York University’s Rudin Center for Transportation, recently wrote in the report Co-Monitoring for Transit Management.

For years, transit agencies have relied on periodic rider surveys to gauge performance and interest in new transit projects and to monitor conditions, among other things. This method of data collection, as the private sector can tell you, is outdated and inaccurate when compared to real-time media posts. Social media has for a while now been a powerful tool in the private sector, where 62 percent of consumers have used social media to report customer service issues and
where nearly 30 percent of customers expect a service response within one hour after they contact a company via social media.

Kaufman recommends that transit agencies develop a “co-monitoring” system that combines staff reports, data analysis and social media to create an improved feedback process, speed up awareness about transit conditions, reduce the cost of infrastructure monitoring, empower riders and improve customer relations. In San Francisco, the Bay Area Rapid Transit agency has already been doing this for several years. The agency receives between 200 and 300 messages via Twitter every day from more than 70,000 followers. While many of the communications via social media can be resolved quickly -- a train car smells funny or is too hot -- the agency’s customer relations department has been aggregating posts that deal with bigger topics, according to Melissa Jordan, a communications representative with the agency. “We are the canary in the coal mine,” she says. “[We] make sure a big issue gets elevated to proper management.”

Using social media as a means to monitor transit systems and their conditions, while boosting public trust in transit, isn’t simple, however. Kaufman points out a number of pitfalls, from legal concerns over records retention to a lack of resources to train staff on using social tools in more sophisticated ways, along with coordinating the information coming from different sources. There’s the issue of dealing with the digital divide between passengers who use social media all the time and others who aren’t digital at all. Social media, with its anonymous participation, has also been shown to invite excessively critical posts.

But if transit agencies develop some basic policy rules that set responsibilities, make communications as accessible as possible, keep the process transparent, and show that the dialogue between the public and the agency leads to accountable actions, the results could be a well managed transit system. Now that’s something to tweet about.

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