THE USES OF COMPLAINTS IN A TRANSIT AUTHORITY

by

MAUREEN F. TRAINOR

Submitted to the Department of
Urban Studies and Planning
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of

MASTER IN CITY PLANNING

at the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June 1984

Signature of Author ______________________
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
May 28, 1984

Certified by ______________________
Ralph Gakenheimer
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by ______________________
Ralph Gakenheimer
Departmental Graduate Committee

THE USES OF COMPLAINTS IN A TRANSIT AUTHORITY

by

MAUREEN F. TRAINOR

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
on May 28, 1984 in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of Master in City Planning

ABSTRACT

This thesis develops the idea that there are uses for complaints in a transit agency. The two uses suggested are (1) a general monitoring function and (2) if handled in an appropriate manner, a technique for improving citizen participation endeavors.

The concept of complaints as the use of voice to register dissatisfaction is developed first. Next, the possible influences on a consumer to complain are explored through an examination of complaints handled at the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA). The third part of the paper looks at the impact of the organizational placement of the complaint handling function. In the next section the uses are defined and explained in detail. The paper closes with specific recommendations for the MBTA.

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Ralph Gakenheimer
Title: Professor of Urban Studies and Planning
and Civil Engineering

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

For too long in public services complaints have been put off to the side, loosely classified as coming from cranks, and generally ignored. This is despite the fact that the few times they have been studied no indications have been forthcoming to justify this attitude. Corresponding to a new attitude developing in the transit industry, that the consumer should be heard and responded to, there is an increasing concern at the MBTA in the complainant as a consumer. Consequently the MBTA is presently in the process of re-evaluating its complaint handling procedures.

Some of the preliminary findings of the evaluation by the consumer relations staff indicates that a problem exists at the MBTA in getting responses back on complaints, once they have been channeled into the system for investigation. They also have noted a high number of employee related complaints and are considering techniques for helping employees improve their performance. Both of these issues need to be examined if the consumer relations staff is to gain credibility both within the agency and with the consuming public. Complaints may, however, be of more use to the authority, if both more were known about the complainant and more of a process was established around the handling of complaints.

With more detailed knowledge of individual complainants, and a better sense of the geographic distribution of complaints, analyses could be performed that could help in monitoring the performance of the system. Given that the analyses would be based on reports from the consumers, the operations staff would be able to gain a sense of the public's perception of the service being provided.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the potential uses of complaints to a transit agency. It will accomplish this by first looking at the process of complaint handling currently existing at the MBTA. This includes taking into consideration influences acting on consumers to complain as well as the organizational structure for handling the complaints. Next, uses found in other organizations will be mentioned as potential methods for consideration. Finally, suggestions specific to the MBTA will be listed.

SECTION ONE: Complaints as Expression of Dissatisfaction

Complaints are produced in the delivery of goods and services both in the profit and nonprofit sectors of the economy. Similarly, complaints are registered both with public and private organizations. In which part of the economy an organization exists, as well as what type of an organization it is, will influence how and why complaints are handled. The more fundamental issue, however, is realizing the consumers' perceptions that lead consumers' dissatisfaction into becoming a complaint.

The market itself creates a measure of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction through sales volumes. Private profit oriented organizations can use this as a measure of how well they are meeting the needs and wants of the public. An increase in sales indicates some level of consumer satisfaction. A decrease in sales, or a general lack of such, can indicate dissatisfaction. Hirschman classifies an individual's dissatisfaction expressed through discontinuence of use as "exit".[1] He contrasts this to "voice" which is the continuing usage of a product or service in the face of dissatisfaction, yet somehow vocalizing this dissatisfaction to others.[2] Hirshman's analysis does not, however, account for the individual who uses voice merely as a prelude to exit. It is assumed, that in the absence of some other reason, that exit will be exercised when it can be.

In a profit oriented business, unless one is in a monopoly situation or at the optimal sales point given production capacity, there is usually the desire to increase the market share. This implies preventing exit as much as possible. To do this a supplier must know how much is being sold, as well as, what are perceived as the good and bad points of the product or service. Marketers in a profit oriented business need to know about consumer atitudes, since a non-buying public makes no direct contribution to the firms continuing existence. Voice, as exercised by dissatisfied customers who have continued to use the product (or service) provide a business with insight about how to improve it.

There are however differences between the delivery of a product and the delivery of a service. A product either is or isn't in the standard condition that the business expects it to be in when they sell it to a customer. A service, however, since it is intangible, inseparable, variable, and incapable of being stored,[3] cannot easily be measured against a single criterion of adequacy once the service has been performed. What this implies is that while a complaint about a product can be both validated and proven true, a complaint about a service rendered is more difficult to verify. In light of this, it is important to realize that although services are a growing sector of the private profit oriented economy they make up a majority of the public nonprofit sector.[4]

Public transit in the US is an example of a service industry operating in the public nonprofit sector. The service it provides is intangible, that being mobility. It is inseparable from the operator and vehicle, which are quite variable in attitude and quality. Finally, it cannot be stored for a seat not used in one run cannot be used later.

In comparison to other publically funded agencies it is important to realize that a transit agency does not quite fit the definition of bureaucracy as postulated by Downs.[5] This is because there remains an outside measure of performance, i.e. the farebox. Although much of the funding for these agencies comes from public sources, in most systems, most riders pay at least a nominal fare. This last remaining vestige of a previously private profit oriented industry should be able to indicate some measure of common approval of the service being delivered. Thus it would appear that the level of "exit" would be an easily recognizable indication of the need and/or desire for the service. Given this, ridership counts could be used to indicate the need for service along any given route.

The problem with this speculation is that there tends to be little competition within the transit industry in a given area. Competition does clearly exist with other modes. It is, however, the extent to which a transit system is perceived as a monopoly by its users in the area that should define whether or not it is. Granted, some transit users have alternative means of transport available to them for any given trip. In the U.S., generally, a large determining factor in the decision of whether to use transit for any given trip is the availability of an automobile.[6] Thus, for many transit users, for the given trip on which they are embarking exit may not be a feasible alternative. In fact, for these consumers at this time, the only way for them to register dissatisfaction is through voice. Under this situation ridership counts and the associated farebox activity can only be considered a monitor of how many people are being served. That is, it can only be used as a quantity measure and not as a quality measure.

Curiously other public services have been searching for measures comparable to the farebox to give an indication of the usefulness of these services.[7] Presumably such measures can document levels of effectiveness. Some examples of the measures created by people with this misconception are the number of clients served, number of beds occupied, time spent per client, etc. The advocates of the use of these measures are operating from a misconception, for by focusing on them, they ignore the fundamental fact that people are often not using these services by choice. Conditions can be created wherein an individual's perception of choice are pruned down to one alternative. In this situation the ability to exit simply isn't present. Voice then becomes the only way of registering dissatisfaciton.

Hirschmann argues that in terms of equity it may be superior if all classes were forced into having to rely on voice instead of exit.[8] This is one reason why complaints about transit are particularly useful. Although many transit users do not rely on transit as their sole means of mobility, for the given trip that a user is making, it may be perceived as the only feasible mode choice. In such situations an effective technique for monitoring an agencies performance can be accomplished through the monitoring of dissatisfaction actualized through the use of voice.

This concept of monitoring was observed and analyzed by Nordlinger in his study of Boston's Little City Halls in the Office of Public Services (OPS).[9] Nordlinger noted that the data from the complaints from the Little City Halls, when centralized in OPS, if carefully coded and analyzed could have contributed to a useful monitoring function for the Mayor.[10] Unfortunately, in this case, although much time was spent on the collection and coding of the data, little analysis was performed.[11] What this indicates is that although users may voice dissatisfaction, that the substantiating data they provide as a rationale for dissatisfaction, even if computerized, may not be useful if it is not analyzed and acted upon.

Nordlinger's study also tried to look at the differences in volume of complaints received once the Little City Halls were opened. In looking at this he tried to determine two things, first did the number of complaints actually increase after the opening of the Little City Halls, and did these complaints lead to any difference in action by the city commissioners.[12] While the contacts did in fact increase, little conclusive evidence was available as to any increase in impact on the commissioners.[13]

In yet another study of complaints, this time of Detroit's environmental quality department, Jones et al., also contributed some useful insights into the dynamic of dissatisfaction as manifested in voice.[14] Using part of the definition developed by Verba and Nie of citizen-initiated contacts, that is, contacting officials individually, Jones et al. analyzed complaint data. In comparing it to census data from the area they found, among other things, that complaints about public service would be channeled to public officials only if the public was aware of the officials role in delivering the service.[15]

Jones et al. and Nordlinger's observations are particularly important to this anlaysis for they indicate that the use of voice, as a way to make dissatisfaction known about public services, depends on two things. First, an individual must be dissatisfied with the service or product as delivered. And, second, the individual must be aware of what official (or agency) to contact.

Dissatisfied transit passengers usually know the agency delivering the service. They may not however, know specifically who to contact inside the agency. Additionally there are public officials outside the agency who may have influence over the agencies operating budget. Who these officials are will vary depending on the type of state and local governments present, and the level of funding being provided by each. Transit passengers may decide to contact these officials to voice concern about specific problems.

In the case of the MBTA, individuals sometimes contact state representatives or state senators. Some individuals, aware of the composition of the MBTA advisory board, may decide to contact their own member representative. Still others contact the executive director of the advisory board directly. The frequency of use of these various channels is difficult to gauge.

Understandably transportation issues are more important to some state senators or represenatives than others. If a large part of one's constituency uses the MBTA, or if one is member of the legislature's transportation committee, transit related issues will presumably be of greater concern than to those without these influences. Comparisons in the handling of MBTA related complaints by various political figures consequently seems unwise. What is useful to remain cognizant of is the difference in the handling of these complaints inside the

MBTA, once a political person decides to pursue the issues raised by her/his constituents. This is an issue because of the influence that these political figures have at the various levels inside the authority. While dissatisfied individuals may call the public affairs/consumer relations office to register a complaint, advisory board members or influential state legislators can directly contact the manager of operations or the general manager.

This sort of indirect contact by dissatisfied passengers is unfortunately difficult to analyze for two reasons. First there is the lack of consistency in the documentation of both the initial contact and later followup by political figures. An example of some of the problems encountered in trying to study this question can be found in the processes used by one representative.[16]

Representative Mary Jane Gibson, member of the House Transportation Committee, noted that sometimes constituent complaints are recorded on constituent cards, other times they are referred to the MBTA complaint line. Although the general division is between issue related complaints and specific operational problems, there is considerable discretion available to her staff when handling such contacts. If the call is referred to the MBTA, then the impact of the call may be lost to Representative Gibson. In contrast, if some record is made of the complaint, then there is a possibility of Rep. Gibson taking action on it immediately via personal contact with MBTA officials or referring back to it at a later date. Thus although no definitional distinction exist, some complaints are referred to the authority, some handled immediately, and some noted but dealt with at a later date.

The second problem with analyzing these indirect complaints to the authority is that many people are unaware of the influences these political figures may have. Tied to this problem is the fact that many people simply don't know who their representatives at the State House are.

Thus because the contacts are handled in a variety of ways, and because this avenue may be unknown to many potential complainants, this analysis will focus on complaints made directly to the MBTA.

SECTION ONE: FOOTNOTES

1. Albert O. Hirschman, Exit Voice, and Loyalty, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970) pp. 3-5.

2. Ibid.

3. Christopher Lovelock and Charles Weinberg, "Public and Nonprofit Marketing Comes of Age," in Gerald Zaltman and Thomas Bonoma (eds.), Review of Marketing 1978 (Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1978) pp. 416-420.

4. Philip Kotler, Marketing for Non-Profit Organizations (Englewood cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1982) pp. 8-9, pp. 477-481.

5. Anthony Downs, Inside Bureaucracy (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1967) pg. 24.

6. Michael Meyer and Miller, Eric J., Urban Transportation Planning: A Decision Oriented Approach, (in proofs), (NY: McGraw Hill, 1984) Chapter 7.

7. Michael Lipsky, Street-Level Bureaucracy, (NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980) pp. 90-93.

8. Hirschman, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, pp. 55-61.

9. Eric A. Nordlinger, Decentralizing the City: A Study of Boston's Little City Halls, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972) pp. 192-198.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid, pp. 192-198, pp. 205-214.

13. Ibid.

14. Bryan Jones, Saadia Greenberg, Clifford Kaufman, Joseph Drew, "Bureaucratic Response to Citizens-Initiated Contacts: Environmental Enforcement in Detroit," American Political Science Review, vol 77 (March, 1977) pp. 148-165.

15. Ibid.

16. Conversation with Representative Gibson, April, 1984

SECTION TWO: Influences on the MBTA Passenger

2.1 Introduction

The concerns expressed by these consumers of a transit system about the service can be indicative of service gaps between individual needs and the services provided. Although not a representative or cross-sectional analysis of potential concerns, the information provided by unsolicited contacts, complaints, may be useful in providing a pulse of the prevailing consumer attitudes. Given this unsolicited contacts made by individuals has potential use to the operations department. This section will analyze the information found in the statistical activity reports which were presented at the MBTA Board of Directors meetings held April, 1983 through March, 1984. This analysis will look at the volume of complaints as an indicator of the influences acting on individuals when they decide whether or not to complain.

Studies of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction suggest that there are three influences on a consumers experience of dissatisfaction and subsequent action. They are:

> "(1) the seller's reputation for quality and service, (2) the nature of the circumstances of the sale, and (3) the responsiveness of the marketing channel in providing redress to dissatisfied consumers."[1]

These influences are important to consider for they will greatly affect the potential quantity and quality of complaints which the authority receives.

The statistical activity reports are compiled biweekly from information collected on complaint forms which is then logged into a record of contacts received. They contain the information aggregated by general categories of service, rail rapid transit, greenline, bus; employee; physical plant improvement; maintenance; and other. They list the number of contacts logged in a period of two weeks, compare it to the number logged in the prior two week period, and also the number logged in the same two week period the year before. The number of complaints are listed in columns by the method in which the contact was made, phone, letter, or in person, and the number answered is also listed, but only for the current period.

Because the Board of Directors meetings are not always held every two weeks, some information gaps exist in the information on responses. Therefore a subset of the year's complaints which consists of 3 months of activity will be used to analyze the response rate. Additionally the actual complaint forms and contacts logged for one week of that period, March 5-9, 1984 will be examined, to detemine how the various types of complaints were channeled in the organization.

The complaint forms on which the complaints are taken provide room for a variety of information. This includes space for a narrative on the nature of the complaint, the date and time of the incident, the name and address of the complainant, and the date of the complaint. Space is also provided for the identification of the line or vehicle on which the incident occured, the direction the vehicle was heading, identification of the employee in question, and 25 types of contacts (see Table 1). There is also room for indentification of the complaint handler, whether the contact was a letter or phone call, and a small amount of space for a description of the action taken.

A petition circulated in a red line car during a service failure

Table 1

Reasons for Contact as Found on MBTA Form

Train late	Parking lots
Train too crowded	Escalator
Bus late/did not show	Bike racks
Bus early	Employee complaint
Bus over crowded	Passenger by-passed
More frequent bus service	Commendation
Extend operating hours	Fare
Condition of vehicle	Accident
Heat or air conditioning	Assault
Bus stop location	Racial
Bus shelter	Condition of station
Bus sign location	Other
Request for additional service	

Source: MBTA Public Affairs and Information that lasted an hour and half and was later presented to the head of public affairs will also be in part of the analysis. In general the analysis will focus on MBTA passengers who use voice to register their dissatisfaction considering how the influences suggested by Day and Landon are exhibited in their actions.

Concerning the basic data, that is the number of complaints, it is important to note that while public affairs does receive many calls referred from other departments, they do not have any sense of how many contacts are actually being made elsewhere in the authority. This is because other departments will sometimes handle the calls on their own and there is no mechanism for public affairs to then be informed of them. Additionally some calls which could be logged as complaints actually end up as information calls. An example of such a contact would be someone calling the information line and complaining that s/he had been standing on a corner for half an hour and wanting to know when the next bus would arrive. Obviously such a contact could easily be classified as a complaint, but if it is made on the information line it would not be logged as one.

Similarly, if calls are lost because the phones are not working or people elect to not speak into a recorder (e.g., on the weekend), some complaints will not be registered. However, even given these problems with the data, some useful insights can still be gained.

2.2 Reputation

Starting with Day and Landon's first influence,[2] is the question of the reputation of the MBTA. The reputation of a service or product can be defined through a number of variables. Three of the most important are: (1) societal attitude or perception of the service or product; (2) individual attitude or perception of it; and (3) actual performance or quality of it. These three variables are essentially the same as what Nelson suggests are the "three sets of variables which translate conditions into problems."[3]

One major distinction between transit users who complain and the help-seeking indivduals that Nelson studied is that transit users are already consumers of the service. They have already translated the variables into individual perceptions gained by use of the service. Consequently the societal attitude is mostly of significance in the way that it modifies the individual user's perceptions. Additionally, actual performance may or may not be reflected in the user's perception of what to expect from the system.

It has been noted by others that the perception an individual holds about the transit service being delivered may or may not accurately reflect the actual service.[4] Thus, it is an individual's perception of the MBTA that creates its reputation for that individual. This perception will be based on the type of service that s/he receives on the particular route that s/he uses as well as the general societal attitude toward the service.

This is not to say that an individual is uninformed. Indeed, if one travels by the MBTA on a daily basis on a trip that lasts approximately 35 minutes from origin to destination,[5] each way, at the end of a week one would have spent 5.8 hours dealing with the system. Assuming that one travels for the same amount of time, 5 days a week, every week of the year, one would have spent approximately 38 work days using the system.

Granted, some trips may not be for 35 minutes, or an individual will probably not travel 260 days per year along a given route. Still, this indicates that the individual who commutes regularly by transit can develop a "working" knowledge of the system. This individual may or may not know whether his/her particular route is comparatively good or bad when compared with the rest of the system. What this individual will know is whether or not the service is consistent. Thus, the individual perception of the system will be tempered by both on general knowledge of the system as well as by the individual's own experience. In terms of reputation of the MBTA, two factors are significant. First there is the reputation of the service itself, and second there is the reputation of the employees.

2.2.1 Service Reputation

Service reliability is in fact a key issue in terms of quality.[6] Thus, short term breakdowns and delays may be calculated into the time needed to arrive at a destination if the reputation of the system warrants it. Similarly, the reputation of the service may be such that although the vehicles may regularly be overcrowded; while they may often "bunch" because of traffic or scheduling problems, while the windows may be broken or fumes belching in, people may not make this into a complaint, unless they have a standard in mind up to which this is unsatisfactory. Consequently people will use the MBTA and not measure the service performance from an objective set of standards, but rather from a subjective standard based on their own past experience. From this what one might expect is generally a low number of complaints even given problematic performance. In fact, with the exception of September and October, this is what seems to exist at the MBTA.

Table 2 illustrates that the number of complaints over the year. With the exception of September and October the weekly average for total complaints was approximatley 102. Again, excluding September and October the service weekly average was 27. What this indicates is that the average number of complaints received is not very high. Even given this low weekly average, there were slight surges with service complaints for a 2 week period ranging from a low of 28 to a high of 113 indicating some degree of variability between two week periods.

In reviewing the year's results of service complaints the numbers which demand explanation are the enormous surges in September and October. As can be seen in Table 3 the number of complaints concerning rail rapid transit soared from 4 during the 2 week period of August 22 to September 4, to 633, in the period of September 19 to September 30. Bus complaints also increased growing from 25 to 120 during the same months. Green line complaints were also high in September but the surge did not equal that found in buses and rapid transit. Some changes altered the reality which the transit passengers had expected. The system was no longer performing as their definition of its reputation had indicated it should.

These tremendous surges were attributed to the opening of the new red line stations at Quincy Adams and Harvard Square. Consequently, these surges were tied to changes brought on by major capital projects. The reason for the general public's extreme reaction to the

Table 2

Distribution of Contacts Made to the MBTA

3/22/83-3/18/84

				Excluding September and October 1983		
Contact Type	#	%	Weekly Average	#	%	Weekly Average
Service	2749	39	53	1225	26	28
Employee	2582	37	50	2149	46	49
Maintenance	400	6	8	333	7	6
Physical Plant Improvement	58	1	1	41	1	1
Other	975	14	19	741	16	17
Complaint Total	6764	96*	130	4489	95	102
Commendations	268	4	5	232	5	5
Contact Total	7032	100	135	4721	100	107

* Slight difference due to rounding

Source: MBTA Statistical Activity Reports as found in Board of Director's Activity Reports for meetings held April, 1983 through March, 1984

TABLE 3

SERVICE COMPLAINTS

PERIOD	RAPID TRANSIT	GREEN LINE	COMMUTER RAIL	BUS	SERVICE TOTAL
3/22-4/2/83	4	6	0	44	54
4/04-4/15	9	2	0	26	37
4/19-4/29	4	3	1	27	35
5/02-5/13	6	2	0	14	22
5/14-5/27	10	2	0	16	28
5/31-6/11	18	4	0	27	49
6/13-6/24	4	40	0	31	75
6/27-7/08	64	10	0	22	96
7/11-7/22	48	10	0	38	96
7/25-8/05	8	18	0	25	51
8/08-8/19	4	5	0	19	28
8/22-9/02	4	3	0	25	32
9/05-9/16	53	7	0	55	115
9/19-9/30	633	41	1	120	795
10/3-10/14	340	24	0	51	415
10/17-10/28	129	13	0	57	199
10/31-11/11	24	6	0	30	60
11/14-11/25	16	9	0	33	58
11/28-12/09	18	5	1	31	55
12/12-12/23	6	13	0	29	48
12/27-1/6/84	9	7	0	19	35
1/09-1/20	44	23	1	45	113
1/23-2/03	20	23	2	43	88
2/06-2/17	18	16	0	30	64
2/20-3/02	9	6	1	18	34
3/05-3/16	17	19	2	29	67
SERVICE TOTAL	1519	317	9	904	2749
% of SERVICE TOTAL	55	12	-	33	100
EXCLUDING #	364	232	8	621	1225
SEPT. & OCT. %	30	19	1	51	101

SOURCE: MBTA Communication Directorate <u>Statistical Activity Reports</u> found in Board of Director Activity Reports, April , 1983 to March , 1984.

new stations could stem from either a lack of knowledge, blunted expectations, or increased frustration.

Specifically, the two problems which arose around the opening of the stations were as follows:

(1) the access at the station was problematic; and

(2) because of the need for going to an extra (non-operative) station for a turnaround (to Davis Square, Somerville), yet, without adding any new equipment, delays were frequent.

As noted earlier, the monopoly situation of the MBTA prohibits exit for many people. Consequently people used voice. They complained. Given the two major problems it is not evident which problem led people to become so dissatisfied. Clearly, some people were dissatisfied because the delays made their trips longer than their past experience suggested they should be. These people were frustrated because the actual service after the opening of the new stations was worse than the service that they had experienced in the past. They were unwilling to accept the need to redefine their perception of the service. In actuality, the service had deteriorated, but their perception of this was that it was abnormal. Adding to this frustration was the societal attitude that a new station should somehow be better. Since the access to the stations was also a problem, for some individuals, even the stations themselves were not an improvement.

In an apparent attempt to quell the dissatisfication an open letter from the general manger was distributed to red line passengers in early October. It was also made into a carcard and found in the trains themselves. The key message of the card was that the MBTA officials were aware of the fact that things were bad, that they were trying, and that MBTA patrons should be patient. By the beginning of November the public had calmed down about the changes, with the number of complaints returning to the range that they were usually in. Thus indicating perhaps an approximation for the amount of time necessary to pass before people will accept changed service as status quo.

Returning to the overall service picture, by looking at table 3, which is by category of service complaints over the year, it is evident that bus complaints are generally the highest and commuter rail complaints generally the lowest. The issue raised by commuter rail however, goes back to the point of Jones et al.[7] and the need for the public to know that the public official is responsible for the service. Since the commuter rail is still operated by the B&M, the former owners, it is possible that many people don't realize the MBTA's role in overseeing this service. What this could mean is that people are contacting the B&M directly to register their dissatisfication. Thus, it seems possible that the commuter rail figures at the MBTA are not reflective of the number of consumers who use voice to register dissatisifaction with this service.

The high number of bus complaints is partially explainable, by looking at the percentage of passengers using the different modes. Using section 15 data for 1982,[8] which came from 1981 MBTA data, the breakdown for passenger by mode at the MBTA is as found in Table 4.

Table 4

Number of Trips by vehicle type,* MBTA

Mode	Number (000)	Percent
Rail rapid transit	90868.3	44
motor bus	97186.4	47
green line	17687.6	8
trolley bus	2456.4	1
demand responsive transit	78.7	--
TOTAL	208277.4	100

*These trips represent the use of each mode either for the entire trip or for part of the trip.

Source: National Urban Mass Transportation Statistics, 1982, Section 15, Annual Report, pg. 3-189.

Bus and green line complaints are however higher than what a strict relationship between the number of trips made and numbers of complaints registered might suggest. Thus, it indicates that either (a) these trips were more inconsistent that rail rapid transit; (b) these passengers had more to complain about; (c) that these users had something in addition to their own perception against which they could measure performance, i.e., a schedule and/or (d) some other explanatory variable. Points a and b are cannot be proved or disproved from the complaint data, since operational details do not accompany these reports. Points C and D however are somewhat capable of being proved by reviewing the individual complaints.

Schedules, suggested in point C, are important to consider for while rail rapid transit users complain in general about delays, bus users state specifically that x bus was not at their corner at y time, as the schedule said it would be. Bus users consequently have at their disposal a standard against which to measure performance, other than their own experience. They in fact have a form of substantiation when they voice dissatisfaction with service. It is a form of proof beyond their own perception that the service should be different.

Finally, point d suggests some data problem which would cause higher than average complaints. It should be noted that part of the reason for the high number of complaints on the green line is the presence of one particularly frustrated user. In the first three months of 1984, he had already sent 53 letters to the communications office and his frustration strongly affects the total count on the green line.

What these complaint levels pose as a questions is, does a system want to improve its "reputation" and increase the expectations of its users, and potentially increase comlaints? This can be accomplished through greater availability of information aids (e.g. schedules) and possibly increased capital expenditures. Or, on the contrary, is a system better off with a consuming public with low expectations for the service? In terms of complaints registered at the MBTA, increased expectations if not met, do seem to increase the number of service complaints.

2.2.2 Employee Reputation

Over the course of the year employee complaints constituted approximatley 37% of all contacts registered. (see table 2) When September and October were deleted from the data, however, they soared to 46% of the average of complaints. In term of the first influence of Day and Landon, that of reputation,[9] it would appear that people have measures by which they judge employee performance. That the number of complaints about employees is higher in general than service complaints would indicate that the concept of variability of service, as noted by Lovelock and Weinberg[10] is an important consideration for transit patrons in relation to the employees. An additional factor contributing to the high number of employee complaints, which is similar to the role of the schedule in service complaints, is the presence of a bus stop sign.

Although by-passing an individual at a stop could be considered a service irregularity, at the MBTA it is generally classified as an employee complaint. In such a situation a user is confident in her/his knowledge of being wronged when s/he calls to register a complaint. Other types of complaints such as speeding and running red lights are also clearly measurable from an objective standard. It is important for operations to be aware of these kinds of service irregularities to effectively measure the performance of a particular route.

Other employee complaints such as mannersims or use of foul language are also important, but in a different way. Ross,[11] in his study of institution building in transit systems noted that for many people the driver was the embodiment of the system. Thus, how a driver treats people can be how the system is perceived as operating. It is important to realize when studying the driver/passenger encounter that this type of interaction is not uncommon. Dealing with other government workers is similar and, even to some extent the interaction one has with a cashier at a supermarket has some similarities. What this indicates is that there are relative standards by which people can rate a transit system employee by comparing her/his behavior to that of employees in other industries.

2.3 Circumstances of the Sale

The second influence of Day and Landon is that of the circumstances of the sale or extenuating circumstance.[12] This can be explained in three ways, the individual's general understanding of the situation, the organization's explanation of the situation, and the degree of dependency experienced by the individual on the organization. What the individual's understanding means is that consumers, even given their prior perception of the reputation of a business will temper their dissatisfaction based on the circumstances in which the sale takes place. This is evidenced in the MBTA complaints to some extent, as well as in the petition that was circulated in a red line car during a service failure. The situation can also be defined by the organization, which in turn can affect the user's perception. It may sometimes be wise for an organization to hide itself under a cloak of extenuating circumstance, to justify particularly poor service delivery.

An example of this last point can be found in the car card from the General Manager which was placed in the red line cars. In many respects what this card did was tell people not only to lower their expectations for the service, but also to accept them because the system was essentially in a period of adjustment. In this respect it could be argued that part of the reason complaints declined was that the riding public's perception about the service was redefined under these newly explained conditions.

Similar evidence of the public's ability to account for and accept seemingly unsatisfactory service, can be found in the reaction of patrons to an hour and a half service failure on the red line. The failure happened during rush hour and lasted from 8:35 a.m. until 10:05 a.m., yet it happened on a day that followed a surprise late March snowstorm. With the exception of the petition that circulated in the car in which the author was trapped, the public affairs department noted that they received only about 10-15 complaints about the situation. This is a very low number when one considers that approximately 1500 people were actually stuck in cars in the subway during that period and many others were forced to wait in the stations.

In reviewing the responses to the petition that circulated through the car in which approximately 150 were trapped for an hour and a half, two implications can be drawn. Either one, people were so angry that they could not see the use in signing anything, or even make a comment. Or, the other possibility is that the manner of the employee in charge of the car, or the fact that it had snowed the day before, created an extenuating circumstance in which people could accept an otherwise intolerable situation.

To understand these implications it is important to note that although there were approximately 150 people trapped only 38 signed a paper that was handed to them which only stated, "To the MBTA

Communications Department: This is to inform you that we had to sit on the train for ____ minutes." There was then space left for name, address, and solutions. The amount of time was to be entered once the train started to move.

Additionally, very few hostile responses were registered (See Table 5). In fact, the seemingly most frustrated statement that suggested, "Bomb the T", was signed by "Ronald Reagan". Generally, even mildly critical comments were accompanied by a compliment to some MBTA employee, "The conductor was very helpful but why don't you keep your trains in better repair?" or "sympathetic crew-but I didn't get to work on time."

Thus, in terms of extenuating circumstances it would seem that MBTA patrons either (a) are sometimes willing to provide excuses for the inferior service that they receive, (b) recognize the variability of performance of an individual employee as improving or worsening a given situation, or (c) are easily placated.

The third explanation of circumstances of the sale is the degree of dependency felt by the user. An extenuating circumstance then can be that many people do not rely on the MBTA as their sole means of transport. As noted earlier, although for the particular trip on which an individual is embarking (e.g. a daily commute to the CBD), s/he may be transit dependent, many individuals have access to an automobile for other trips. Thus, although individuals may seemingly be transit dependent for certain trips, this is not their sole means of mobility. The importance of this distinction rests in the differences in attitudes about what is tolerable.

TABLE 5

PETITION SUMMARY FROM CAR #01479

RED LINE FAILURE MARCH 30, 1984

	#	%
Signatures	*37	100
Suspected false signatures	4	11
Signatures with address	2	5
Signatures with comments/solutions	23	62
Types of Comments (may be classified more than once)		
Comic remarks	8	
Calls for retribution/redress	4	
General disgust	4	
Recommendations	7	
Personnel commendations	6	

*This is from an estimated 150 passengers on the car. Every individual had the opportunity to read and/or sign the petition becausethe failure lasted long enough to have the petition passed around the entire car from person to person.

Source: Petition submitted to MBTA Consumer Relations Manager April 1984.

Guseman and Womak in their work analyzing transit systems in Texas found that crowding was a much larger issue for those who were reliant on transit as their sole means of mobility than it was for individuals with other alternatives.[13] Additionally, they found that "satisfaction with the local transit system is significantly related to the perceived crowding on the bus".[14]

2.4 Redress

The third influence, that is a sense of potential for redress may in fact be the most important influence[15] in the volume of complaints that the MBTA receives. Redress, in the purchase of a product, could be replacement of a faulty product with another or reimbursement and the product returned. Redress in the purchase of a service is unfortunately more difficult to obtain. Given the temporal quality of transit service it cannot be exchanged when inadequately provided at one time. The only redress possible is some sort of redress of the problem itself, by fixing it. Additionally there are methods of ameliorating or empathizing with the public through the issuance of recompense at another time or the provision of an explanation. Responses from a transit agency can include free transit vouchers, excuses to employers, an apology or explanation from the authority, or an investigation of the employee in question.

At the MBTA the issuance of employer excuses or fare repayment is infrequent, however, answers of some sort are provided as indicated on the statistical activity reports. Thus an analysis of the answers given to the various types of complaints could prove relevant.

Looking at the answer rate (number answers given/number complaints received) for service related complaints for the three month period, from December 27, 1983 until March 16, 1984 shows a rate of around 55% (see Table 6). The answer rate for employee complaints is slightly higher, at 60%. It is important to note that although a time lag reasonably exists between the registering of a complaint and its being answered, that the number of answers over a three month period should provide a general indication of the answer rate. Two questions thus are raised: (1) what is an answer? and (2) what is the route that a complaint takes that leads to an answer being given.

For the purposes of the statistical activity reports an answer is a letter being sent, or any indication on the complaint form of an answer being provided.

While counting the number of answers issued when answer is defined in this way, may be the best way to gauge the activity of the department, it is not an adequate analysis of the responsiveness of the authority. Assuming that the answer rate alone is indicative of the responsiveness of the authority, and the potential for redress to individuals, includes:

(a) that every contact can be reached for a reply,

(b) that the replies issued actually correspond to the expressed concern,

(c) that each individual receives only one response.

A closer examination is required of the responses given and, of the routing of the complaints themselves is necessary before one can accept the answer rate as the indicator of the authority's responsiveness to complaints. The key issues which seem to determine how a complaint will be answered and routed are, in order of priority:

Table 6

Answer Rate*

12/27/83-3/16/84

	Letters	Calls	Walk-ins
Service	100%	55%	57%
Employee	96%	60%	100%
Maintenance	100%	39%	0
Physical Plant Improvement	100%	25%	100%
Other	91%	62%	0
Total	96%	57%	54%

* Note that the answers are not necessarily responding directly to any one complaint. Rather, over a period of 3 months it provides an approximation of the likely rate of response.

Source: MBTA Statistical Activity Reports as found in the Board of Director's Activity Reports for meetings held January, 1984-March, 1984

(1) does the complainant supply his or her name and address or phone number,

(2) is the complaint employee or service related,

(3) if an employee complaint, is there sufficient detail to initiate an investigation, and

(4) is the complainant a chronic complainer.

From a review of the complaints either logged or taken the week of March 5-March 9, 1984 it appears that the single most important determinant in whether a complaint is routed for investigation or information is the presence of the complainant's name and address or phone number. If the complainant does not provide the department with this information then the complaint is automatically routed for information only, or not routed. Although the department readily acknowledges the difference in their way of handling service or employee complaints, they seem to have omitted the distinction between "authored" and "anonymous" complaints from their internal analysis.

This is not to say that it is impossible to receive a response to a request without giving one's name, address, and/or phone. What it does suggest is that the impetus to find the answer might be lost if the response sought cannot be ascertained immediately (i.e. while a person is standing there or on hold).

The second tier of routing is between service and employee related calls. While service calls are usually routed for information, some calls only seem to receive a formal response from the public affairs office which hopes that service in the future is "more acceptable" to the complainant. Complaints that receive this sort of response may or may not be routed. Additionally, general complaints about "lousy service" even if "authored" may not be passed on, even as information.

When the service comments are passed on to area supervisors, there is generally no report sent to the operations department. Thus service planning will hear about these comments only through conversation with area supervisors or public affairs people. This is in contrast to employee complaints which are funneled directly to operations, either for information or investigation.

If the name and address of the complainant was taken during the contact, then an employee complaint is routed for investigation. A response to an employee complaint can come in two letters. First one from the public affairs office stating that the information had, in fact, been passed on to the operations department and later a follow up statement on the results of the investigation. If insufficient detail was provided in the original complaint, then there may not be any follow up letter.

Given that service complaints only receive a form letter of apology, while employee complaints receive individualized attention, the quality of response provided by the MBTA encourages employee complaints over service comlaints. This is because, although it may not be aware of it, the MBTA , is more likely to provide redress for an employee complaint than it will for a service complaint.

2.5 Conclusion

Day and Landon in suggesting the importance of the three influences on consumers of reputation, extenuating circumstances, and redress provided a useful framework in which to analyze complaints.

This chapter, in analyzing the complaints made to the MBTA, found evidence that the use of voice to register dissatisfaction is apparently influenced by these factors.

The importance of recognizing these influences to management is that it provides a way to weight the complaints that are received. This weighting can in part be accomplished by asking some additional questions of complainants and also by explaining to them the differences in how their complaint will be handled depending on the information given.

SECTION TWO: FOOTNOTES

1. Ralph L. Day and E. Lair Landon, Jr., "Toward a theory of Consumer Complaining Behavior," in Arch G. Woodside, Jagaish N. Sheth, and Peter D. Bennett (eds.), Consumer and Industrial Buying Behavior, (NY: Elsevier North-Holland, Ind., 1977) pp. 425-437.

2. Ibid.

3. Barbara Nelson, "Help-Seeking From Public Authorities: Who Arrives at the Agency Door?", Policy Sciences, Vol. 12, No. 2 (August 1980), pp. 175-192.

4. Frederick Dunbar and Christopher Lovelock, "The State of the Art in Urban Travel Consumer Research," in Richard K. Robinson and Christopher H. Lovelock (eds.), Marketing Public Transportation, Policies, Strategies and Research Needs for the 1980's (Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1981) pp. 87-95.

5. This amount of time noted in G.J. Fielding, "Marketing Organization and Strategies for Transit Agencies," in Robinson and Lovelock, op cit. and is based on an estimate of time beyond which people are unlikely to make a transit trip and this estimate and was developed by Y. Zahavi, The Measurement of Travel Demand and Mobility, (Geneva: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1978). Although it may be an overestimate for some users, it provides an indication of the cumulative effect of using transit regularly.

6. Ray A. Mundy, "Mass Transit Guidelines versus A Consumer Orientation in Public Transportation Systems," Transportation Research Record, No. 625, TRB, 1977, pg. 35.

7. Jones, et al., "Bureaucratic Response to Citizens-Initiated Contacts: Environmental Enforcement in Detroit," American Political Science Review, vol. 71 (March, 1977), pp. 148-165.

8. Jacobs, Michael, O'Connor, Robert and Chen, Suzanne, National Urban Mass Transportation Statistics, 1982, Section 15, Annual Report, Springfield, VA, NTIS, 1983, pp. 3-189.

9. Op Cit., Day and Landon.

10. Christopher Lovelock and Charles Weinberg, "Public and Nonprofit Marketing Comes of Age," in Gerald Zaltman and Thomas Bonoma (eds.), Review of Marketing 1978 (Chicago: American marketing Association, 1978) pp. 416-420.

11. Harry Ross and Ellen Foster Curtis, Essentials for Transit, (Bloomington, IND: Indiana University, Division of Research, 1979) pg. 109.

12. Op Cit., Day and Landon.

13. Patricia Guseman and Katie Womack, Evaluation of Transit Service Improvements: Measures of System Effectiveness, (Springfield, VA: NTIS, 1978).

14. Ibid, pg. 40.

15. Op Cit., Day and Landon.

SECTION THREE: ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

3.1 More Than One Public

Etzioni has noted that once organizations become bureaucratized there is a separation between consumption and control.[1] In non-profit organizations Lovelock and Weinberg [2] call this separation the distinction between "resource allocation" (among consumers) and "resource attraction" (from funding agents). The rationale for accepting this distinction in public transit is straightforward. Although transit is paid for in large part from government resources, only a small percentage of the population of any area consume the transit service provided. These individuals should be recognized as a separate group from the larger majority of people who are not consuming any. Unfortunately the situation develops that political figures, who supply many of the resources to a transit agency, experience pressure to meet the many varying attitudes of their constituents. Transit managers are, in turn, obliged to respond to the concerns of the general public, which is composed of individuals with these varying attitudes. A broad categorical breakdown of general attitudes toward transit can be made in terms use. There are those who use it now, those who don't but might, and those who never will.[3]

Citizen participation programs exist, in part, to ensure that the opinions of all the publics can have some effect on proposed changes, not just current users. Thus citizen participation programs which can include surveys, meetings, etc., are geared in many ways to addressing the potential concerns of the resource providers, which also are influenced some by consumers. These programs, although supported by public affairs people, are quite often orchestrated by planners. The programs that are geared primarily to learn about consumer ideas, such as a complaint line, are found in the marketing/public affairs/consumer relations offices of the agencies.

While committees composed of planners and public affairs people may consider some of the comments or ideas about some service conditions and/or improvements, very few individual contacts can make it to decision makers in the operations department when bureaucratic barriers of responsibility and chain of command prohibit their passage. Marketers/public affairs people are consequently delegated the responsibility of fielding the calls and letters.

3.2 Organization Structure

In many respects it is the status of the office, wherein the function of complaint handling is located, that affects its relative importance in decision making. The placement of the handling of the consumer complaint function within the hierarchy of an organization is itself an indication of the authority's attitude to the information it receives.

At the MBTA this service is part of the public affairs and information office of the communications directorate. The communications directorate is part of the executive office. The link between operations and service planning and public affairs exists primarily in the service planning committee. There is no other formal link from public affairs to service planning, although information is regularly routed there.[4] The lack of this link is not atypical in the industry, particularly in the larger authorities.

Another indication of the relative status of complaints is the level of analysis performed on the complaints and how much influence these analysis have with decision makers. At the MBTA the public affairs and information office, some attempt at compilation has occured. Statistical activity reports are included as part of the communications directorate portion of the activity reports issued at every board of directors meeting (about twice a month). These statistical activity reports include total contacts by a variety of categories and compares them to the number of contacts in the previous year and period. Very little analysis is performed on these reports, with the exception of noting any percentage increase or decrease in contacts.

Another summary of the work compiled by the public affairs department can be found in the MBTA's annual report. In this the total number of contacts is noted on an average weekly basis. The 1982 annual report issued in 1983 stated that there were an average 350 calls and letters per week.[5] Given the level of ridership of 144.4 million[6] in 1982 this level of complaining does not seem that high (1 complaint for approximately every 8,000 passengers carried). This number was in fact 100 calls per week higher than the number noted in the 1981 report.[7] It is unclear why the number was different from the 1981 figure, since the level of contacts had, according to the manager of consumer relations remained approximately the same as 1981, 1982 and 1983. While this may seem a small issue if one looks at a total number of the contacts documented in a year's worth of statistical activity reports, the number is different still. In the year period, analyzed for this thesis the average number of contacts was closer to 150 per week (or 1 complaint for approximately every 20,000 passengers carried).

What this all indicates is that the summary information for complaints at the MBTA is apparently not receiving much scrutiny. The question then is what complaints, if any, have impact on the GM's and operations department managers' understanding of the public's perception of the service.

Through the quirks of the routing procedures these decision makers do in fact see some individual reports. Since this portion is not even representative of the concerns expressed, there will be a gap in their understanding of the environment for which they are planning. Ross notes:[8]

> "...it is the filtered personnel impressions (by organizational decision-makers) of what the environment is like, rather than what the environment actually may be, that is significant for organizational action. If a gap exists between perceptions and actuality, such a gap could signify future difficulties as a result of planning based on false premises..."

What this implies for transit users in the Boston area is that writing a letter directly to the GM about service related issues will have greater impact on the system than contacting the communications directorate. This is because a letter written to the GM is funneled down through a number of levels of decision makers and does not go directly to the person with responsibility over the area about which one is complaining. In contrast, information received by the communications directorate is funneled directly to the appropriate garage. In terms of immediacy of impact, a letter written to the GM has a serious disadvantage, however, in terms of alerting decision makers of potential problem areas this is a superior route. In general, however, the lack of centralizing of letter receipt and set procedures for follow-up response leads to inconsistencies in how complaints received by various offices are handled.

SECTION THREE: FOOTNOTES

1. Amitai Etzioni, Modern Organizations, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.), 1964. pp. 94-96.

2. Christopher Lovelock and Charles Weinberg, "Public and Nonprofit Marketing Comes of Age", in Gerald Zaltman and Thomas Bozoma (eds.), Review of Marketing 1978, (Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1978), pp. 21, 416-420.

3. G.J. Fielding, "Marketing Organization and Strategies for Transit Agencies", in Richard Robinson and Christopher Lovelock (eds.), Marketing, Public Transportation, Policies, Strategies, and Research Needs in the 1980's, (Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1981), pp. 8-21.

4. This observation was the result of conversations with two key employees at the MBTA, Karla Karash, Direction Operations and Service Planning and Doris Dorsey, Manager of Consumer Relations. It should be noted that the direction of the absent link is from public affairs/consumer relations to service planning. There is, however, at present, a formal link from operations and service planning to the communications directorate.

5. MBTA Annual Report 1982, Boston, MA: 1983.

6. Ibid.

7. MBTA Annual Report 1981, Boston, MA: 1982.

8. Harry Ross and Ellen Foster Curtis, Essential for Transit, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, Division of Research 1976), pg. 31.

SECTION FOUR: USES OF COMPLAINTS

4.1 Introduction

What this analysis suggests is two uses for complaints in a transit agency. This last section, will elaborate on these two uses indicating some authorities who are making use of complaints in these ways. The two uses are (a) monitoring and (b) improving community meetings.

4.2 First Use: General Monitoring

The first and major use of complaints is, if they are collected and analyzed in useful ways that they can provide a general monitoring function for and agency. As discussed earlier, the use of voice to register dissatisfaction can be used to measure the pulse of the public perception of the service being provided.

A growing awareness of the usefulness of measuring complaints as a performance indicator can be found in recent reports from a number of authorities. MTC in Minneapolis, TTC in Toronto, and PAT in Pittsburgh are all using complaints as a general indicator of performance. In Toronto, a system with a reputation for a high quality service, by the end of 1982 there was once complaint for every 69,000 passengers carried,[1] and in 1983 in Minneapolis there were 11.03 complaints for every 100,000 passengers.[2] By comparing these counts to the same counts in the preceding year these authorities note whether the numbers increased or decreased. They then offer possible explanations for the variations, by comparing the complaints to the system's actual performance[3].

The usefulness of this monitoring mechanisms is greater when one considers (a) the influences on the consumers, and (b) the organizational structure and how that influences the complaint handling.

4.2.1 Consideration of Influences on Consumers

As discussed in Section 2 there are serious analytical problems which can develop when trying to use complaints in any sort of monitoring function in a transit agency. In analyzing complaint data at a transit agency, it is important to realize that different categories of passengers exist and that they have different expectations of the system. Additionally, some passengers may just be more prone to complaining than others. Consequently, it will be important to carefully track both who is complaining, as well as, what s/he is complaining about. This means that complaints should be followed overtime by classification of passenger complaining, and, should be compared to what the operations department thinks is the actual service being delivered. This last measure can become a particularly important point of comparison because if service is known to have been poor and complaints are still low, problems may be developing which could be manifested in the future.

Essentially complaints can fall into one of four categories, a, b, c, or d as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Relationship of Service to Complaints

	Service good (adequate)	Service bad (inadequate)
Many Complaints	a	c
Few Complaints	b	d

If complaints are at level "a" then there is a problem with people having expectations that are simply too high for the service at present. There is also the possibility that although service is being delivered in an adequate amount, that the attitude of the deliverers is such that the service is rated poorly.

The ideal situation is to be at level "b", with good service being delivered and few complaints being received. In this category the level of service is appropriate, and people are aware of it. Similarly, if the service is poor, people should be complaining to the agency as noted in level "c". In this situation people are unaccepting of the delivery of poor service and they are informing the agency directly, voicing their dissatisfaction. Researchers have noted the importance of this phenomenon to transit in commenting on the need to control negative word of mouth communication about a system.[4] By channeling comments directly to the agency, provided some sort of response is given which satisfies the complainant, negative perceptions may not be as likely to be passed from one individual to another.

This is unfortunately the opposite of what occurs if the situation falls into level "d", where there is poor service, yet still relatively few complaints are being made. Although indicative of an agency which may have a large amount of negative work of mouth communication, it still may be the desired position for the agency.

Regardless, of whether or not complaints are filed, a transit agency's operations department knows at some level if the vehicles are operating. Although the performance of individual operators is difficult to monitor while they are on the road, the primary concern of the operations department is the actual provision of service. This they can ascertain from their own sources. Given that many transit agencies in this country are publically funded, the less documentation available of known dissatisfaction, the stronger the argument for their entitlement to public funds. Thus, while unlikely to develop a loyal following, the short run picture is more likely to remain positive and their funds will be assured.

The issue of loyality is however an important one to transit in particular, since as some have noted, transit often becomes the mode choice of people only when problems arise around auto travel.[5] Once the barriers to auto travel are removed, people will return to using an auto as their means of transport. Hirshman also noted loyalty as an important attitude to generally develop among consumers.[6] He defined it as essentially the opposite of "exit", in that people were both satisfied and held a generally positive attitude toward the service being provided.

Thus the question is raised, should an agency encourage complaints? This could be achieved through a widely advertised phone number, slogans being posted on vehicles and stations, or suggestions by the vehicle operators to contact the authority directly. Presumably the data which could result from such a campaign would be greater in quantity then that which the authority already was receiving. There is, however, no reason to believe such data would be anymore representative of the issues which were already being presented. Consequently, careful tracking of complaints before, during and after the campaign would be necessary to draw any conclusions.

A problem which develops regardless of the original quantity is if complaints are only used as a monitoring agent, then the emphasis need not be on response. This potential lack of response can in fact lead to the situation which develops at level "d", and this can minimize the significance of the monitoring aspects of the process. Nevertheless, even at such a minimal level, the expressions of dissatisfaction can potentially be useful to the agency in understanding the public's level of tolerance of poor service or to note particular problems.

In San Francisco, California at BART[7] a computer program was developed which used complaints made by the riders as a major input in measuring how well the system is doing.[8] Checkers are then assigned to ride the system making notes on, among other things, the levels of rubbish, general cleanliness of the stations, and whether or not the trains are on time. This, while not an isolated case, New Jersey also did some consumer related performance measuring at one time, it is far from the industry standard. What this illustrates is that techniques do exist to better incorporate information from the public into essentially a monitoring function for operations department.

4.2.2 Influences on Decision Makers

The use of complaints, as discussed in Section 3 may also be affected by the organizational structure for handling the complaints. In small agencies the general manager may be personally involved in the monitoring of complaints.

In smaller authorities with complaint information routed directly to the general manager (GM) there is a centralization of control over this information. An example of one such authority is the Cambria County Transit Authority of Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

As described in a handbook[9] compiled for the Pennsylvania DOT, at this authority telephone comments are taken on a passenger service report. The GM reviews the reports on a daily basis and then follows up on complaints with a letter, phone call, or by referring the complaint on to the department head with responsibility over the service or employee at issue. These reports are reviewed again when quarterly evaluations of employees are performed to determine those operators who are to be recognized as distinguished drivers. Operators will lose points for each complaint lodged against them. In this system, then, the GM is aware of all the complaints coming in, the operations department is aware of how well their plans are being implemented, and the individual operators have a measure of how their behavior is being perceived by the public.

Johnstown is, however, a small system with total employees in 1979-80 of only 83 and an operating budget of $1.8 million. This is compared to the 8 other systems out of 13 in Pennsylvania which make use of complaint forms as a marketing technique.[10] These other systems ranged in size in 1979-80 by number of employees from 36 to 6,021. The detailed level of control by the GM as found in Johnstown with total employees of 83, is simply not possible in a large system, such as Philadelphia's with 6,021 employees. This is true for large systems in general. The decision makers, such as the head of operations and the GM, in a large system can, however, become more fully aware of comments being made by transit users about the authority. This could be accomplished if comparative summaries by route, overtime were compiled by those taking the information and then analyses performed.

To improve the consistency of response provided by the authorities, attempts are being made in some to assign specific responsibility over, at least, written comments. In Philadelphia at SEPTA, while marketing handles telephone requests and comments, public affairs answers letters written either to them <u>or</u> the GM. In the New York City area, there is an attempt to centralize all the letter writing at the MTA, the umbrella organization for seven authorities. This is difficult because of the number of authorities involved, although MTA is trying to locate this service there in their public affairs office.

Centralizing the information in this way has the benefit in a large authority of uniformity in response, both in terms of the time it takes to respond and the kind of response given. Unfortunately it does nothing for tightening the link between phone contacts (by far the more common form) and their influence on decision makers. This link is most clearly found in Atlanta at MARTA, where although they still have problems there with which division should handle complaints, the marketing division, is in fact part of the operations division.[11]

Of course, moving the office that handles unsolicited contacts from one branch of the organizational tree to another is not going to either guarantee or prohibit useful evaluation by decision makers of the information it receives. The bottom line is that the decision makers must consider this information as valid in the first place. They provide proof of their validation by using this information when planning routes and when measuring performance of either individuals or routes,or the system itself. In the case of CCTA in Johnstown, the information is used to help rank the performance of operators. As noted earlier, at BART, the system itself is rated.

4.2.3. Conclusion

Thus while unsolicited contacts may seem like small side issues or a nuisance to an operations department, particularly if it is separated from the public affairs or marketing functions, useful information can be garnered from these contacts. Similarly, the fact that they come mostly from consumers and not from the public at large should not be seen as cause for automatically dismissing them from being a legititmate, albeit a general, monitoring mechanism. To adequately analyze these complaints, the influences acting on an individual to complain should be recognized, as well as, the problems created by the organizational structure.

4.3 Second Use: Improve Community Meetings

The second use of complaints focuses on their importance when they are expressed in an arena of citizen participation programs. Assuming that the complaints are present in an agency where a citizen participation program exists, the effective handling of complaints can essentially provide a first line of defense at community meetings. If the agency has answered complaints, and has aggregated them by community then the agency will be able to ward off confrontations based on non responsiveness to complaints.

Bronzaft, in a meeting with others concerned with marketing issues noted that public meetings often turn into confrontations between "angry transit riders and bored, indifferent managers and board members."[12] It is important to realize that complaint lines serve as a first line of communication for the authority. If consumers could use these lines as a way of gaining redress for unacceptable situations, then the process which occurs at public meetings could serve as second step in the citizen participation process. Instead of being adversarial, such meetings could be used in more productive ways, such as sharing suggestions or even some decision making. For this change to happen, people will need to know that their complaints will be responded to. Similarly if well prepared the agency will also be able to indicate to the community members present at the meeting why particular issues may or may not seem important to the agency.

An agency which has organized its complaints handling functions well should be able to go to community meetings where participants have already voiced their dissatisfication elsewhere and the meetings should be able to be focused on other matters. These could include processes such as brainstorming for new ideas, review of old suggestions or the sharing of information and/or decision making between agency and community. Thus, by properly handling complaints on an ongoing basis, community metings can be raised from confrontational to an exchange of ideas.

The odd twist that develops when an agency becomes more responsive is that is looses control over the predictability of the citizen participants. By generally being aware of the service reliability, yet by not taking special action on consumer concerns, there exists a good chance that the public meetings will dwell on these issues. This provides a degree of predictability, which as Michel Crozier[13] has suggested, is indicative of a form of control in a bureaucratic setting.

By maintaining public meetings as the forum to handle complaints, the agency has control over the kind of discussion. Although citzens will choose which complaints to dwell on, it is the citizens who are predictable, in that they will be complaining about some problem. In this respect, citizen participation can become an appendage to a bureaucratic process, where control is based in part on making someone or something else predictable, while remaining, individually unpredictable.

Thus, the question must be asked, does an agency actually want to improve its responsiveness and potentially lose some of its control of public meetings. This could develop if the agency no longer has control of the type of discussion which will take place. Greater demands may be placed on agencies for community roles in decisionmaking. Similarly explanations about a wider variety of issues may be desired. In either case, the simple control exercised by an awareness of the likely complaints which might otherwise dominate the meeting will be lost.

SECTION FOUR: FOOTNOTES

1. TTC, Quarterly Performance Measurement Report, Toronto: TTC, February 1983, pg. 24.

2. Brian Lamb, Performance Measurement Report, St. Paul, MN: MTC, 1984.

3. Ibid., citations 1 and 2.

4. Frederick Dunbar and Christopher Lovelock, "The State of the Art in Urban Travel Consumer Research", in Richard K. Robinson and Christopher H. Lovelock (eds.), Marketing Public Transportation, Policies, Strategies and Research Needs in the 1980s, Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1981, pp. 87-95.

5. Fred G. Cuter, "Marketing Strategies to Improve Transit Effectiveness," in G.J. Fielding and Al Hollinder (eds.), Proceedings of the Conference in Improving Transit Performance (Irvine, CA: University of California, 1980) pg. 51.

6. Albert O. Hirschman, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970) pp. 76-86.

7. Matt duPleiss, Monitoring the Quality of Service From the Passengers' Perspective, paper presented for the Sixty-third Annual Meeting, Transportation Research Board, Washington, DC, 1984.

8. Ibid.

9. Peter Muller-Munk Associates, Division of Wilbur Smith Associates, Transit Marketing in Pennsylvania, a Handbook of Effective Transit Marketing Aids, Pittsburgh, PA: 1981, unpaginated.

10. Ibid.

11. MARTA Operations Planning and Marketing Unit, A Marketing Program for MARTA, Atlanta, Georgia: MARTA, September, 1983, pg. 14.

12. Arline Bronzaft, "Understanding Traveler Information Needs for Decision Making", in Robinson and Lovelock, op. cit., pp. 37-44.

13. Michel Crozier, The Bureaucratic Phenomenon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) pp. 145-174.

SECTION FIVE: Suggestions for the MBTA

This final section looks at how the MBTA public affairs/consumer relations office can improve its handling of complaints. Basically it can do so in four ways:

(1) it can provide an analysis of the complaints noting not only the number being made by general categories, but also details on complaints coming from residents of particular communities or who use the service at particular times of day,

(2) it can improve the information received by adding to the details on the complaint, details on the complainant,

(3) it can improve its responsiveness to complaints by assigning individuals in consumer relations with responsibility over the follow-up on complaints by geographic area, and

(4) begin having meetings regularly with required attendance of area planners, relevant consumer relations staff, and area supervisors.

For the operations department to be able to make use of these complaints in any planning function, not only will the complaints have to be aggregated in a useful way, but also the system itself will need to be monitored for known inconsistencies from published sources. It will only be in comparing the two, that they will begin to gain insight into the traveling public's perception of the service that they are providing. It would then be useful for the communications department to develop a way of computerizing their complaint data. This will be important since the comparison manually of the many categories of complaints may result in excess data and yet no useful information.

The second measure concerns the vast majority of complaints which are registered at the MBTA via the phone lines. It will require the complaint handlers to elicit more information from the complainant. In addition to finding out the nature of the complaint, it will be her/his responsibility to also find out some information on the complainant. The following is a list of questions which could be asked after the details of the complaint have been received:

(1) Has (mention the complaint) ever happened to you before?

(2) About how often do you travel by the T?

_____times per week or

_____times per month or

_____times per year.

(3) About what time of day do you usually travel?

(4) Was this the time of day that (mention the complaint) occured.

(5) What is your name and address so we can get back to you with a response? Or if not appropriate or if the complainant is unwilling to give it--Would you mind telling me the town you live in so our representative who keeps track of complaints from your area will know about it?

The addition of these questions would add to the time spent on each call, however, the detail would greatly improve both the ability to track complaints as well as analyze trends.

The third suggestion is that individuals become responsible over the follow up of the complaints of specifc areas. They in turn will be responsible for the analysis of that area's service as expressed by the consumers which will be presented to both the operations department and the general manager. Although the continued noting of complaints by a line is a useful tool, an analysis based on community of residence could prove move productive. This will greatly improve the usefulness of the information in the public meetings since it will be aggregated by community, which is how people are organized. Finally, having an individual in community relations responsible for complaints from a particular area will create an internal prod to make sure that investigations are carried out.

The fourth suggestion is to have regular meetings, inhouse, of key personnel. Given a format of periodic meetings between service planners, area supervisors, and the consumer relations staff who have prepared the analyses of complaints by area, a method for monitoring service can be established beyond the issuing of reports. With the participation of all three areas, comparisons can be made on what the planners assume is being delivered, what the area supervisors know is happening, and what the feedback is from the consumers on the service. Their analyses will provide decision makers in operations with information that will be useful in planning of routes in particular areas, with some of the problems and some of the unique qualities of the passengers in those areas becoming evident.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brunton, Deborah S., "Marketing's Role in Transit Performance Measures," in Fielding, G.J. and Hollinden, A.L. (eds.), Proceedings of the Conference on Improving Transit Performance Effectivness. Irvine, CA: University of California, Institute of Transport Studies and Social Sciences, 1980, pp. 56-59.

Cutler, Fred G., "Marketing Strategies to Improve Transit Effectiveness," in Fielding, G.J. and Hollinden, A.L. (eds.), Proceedings of the Conference on Improving Transit Performance Effectiveness. Irvine, CA: University of California, Institute of Transport Studies and Social Sciences, 1980, pp. 49-55.

Day, Ralph L. and Landon, E. Laird, Jr., "Toward a Theory of Consumer Complaining Behavior," in Arch. G. Woodside, Jagaish N. Sheth, and Peter D. Bennett (eds.), Consumer and Industrial Buying Behavior, NY: Elsevier North-Holland, Inc., 1977, pp. 425-437.

Downs, Anthony, Inside Bureaucracy, Boston: Little, Brown, 1967.

duPleiss, Matt, Monitoring the Quality; of Service from the Passengers' Perspective. Prepared for the sixty-third annual meeting Transportation Research Board: Washington, DC, January 1984.

Etzioni, Amitai, Modern Organization, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964.

Fagence, Michael, Citizen Participation in Planning, Elsmford, NY: Pergammon Press, Inc., 1977.

Guseman, Patricia Knight and Womack, Katie N., Measures of System Effectiveness. Springfield, VA: NTIS, 1978.

Hill, Larry B., "Bureaucratic Monitoring Mechanisms," in Goodsell, Charles T. (ed.), The Public Encounter Where State and Citizen Meet, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1981, pp. 160-186.

Hirschman, Albert O., Exit, Voice and Loyalty, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.

Hoey, William F., "Dial-a-Ride in the Context of Demand-Responsive Transportation: A Critical Appraisal," Transportation Research Record, No. 608, Washington, DC: 1976, pp. 26-29.

________________, and Levinson, Herbert S., "Attitude Surveys, Transit Planning, and Automobile Use Constraints," Transportation Research Record, No. 625, TRB, 1977, pp. 1-4.

Hoover, Julie, H. and Altschuler, Alan A., Involving Citizens in Metropolitan Region Transportation Planning, Report prepared for U.S.

Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Washington, DC: Parsons, Brinckerhoff, Quade and Douglas, Inc., 1977.

Jacobs, Michael, O'Connor, Robert and Chen, Suzanne, *National Urban Mass Transportation Statistics, 1982, Section 15 Annual Report*, Springfield, VA, NTIS, 1983.

Jones, Bryan D., Greenberg, Saadia R., Kaufman, Clifford, and Drew, Joseph, "Bureaucratic Response to Citizens-Initiated Contacts: Environmental Enforcement in Detroit," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 71, No. 1, March 1977, pp. 148-165.

Kotler, Philip, *Marketing for Non-Profit Organizations*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1982.

Lamb, Brian, *Performance Measurement Report*, St. Paul, Minnesota: MTC, 1984.

Langton, Stuart, *Citizen Participation in America, Essays on the State of the Art*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company, 1977.

Lipsky, Michael, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980.

MARTA Operations Planning and Marketing Unit, *A Marketing Program for MARTA*, Atlanta, Georgia: MARTA, September, 1983.

MBTA, *Annual Report 1981*, Boston, MA: MBTA, 1982.

MBTA, *Annual Report 1982*, Boston, MA: MBTA, 1983.

MBTA Communications Department, *Statistical Activty Reports*, from Board of Directors Activity Reports for meetings held April, 1983 through March 1984.

MBTA Communications Department, Complaints logged March 5-9, 1984.

Meyer, Michael and Miller, Eric J., *Urban Transportation Planning: A Decision Oriented Approach*, (in proofs) New York, McGraw-Hill, 1984.

Mundy, Ray A., "Mass Transit Guidelines versus a Consumer Orientation in Public Transportation Systems," *Transportation Research Record*, No. 625, TRB, 1977, pp. 33-37.

Nelson, Barbara J., "Helping-Seeking from Public Automobiles: Who Arrives at the Agency Door?", *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 12, No. 2, August 1980, pp. 175-192.

Nordlinger, Eric A., *Decentralizing the City: A Study of Boston's Little City Halls*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1982.

PAT, *Transit System Performance, Update FY 1983*, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, PAT, August, 1983.

Peter Muller-Munk Associates, a division of Wilbur Smith and Associates, Transit Marketing in Pennsylvania, A Handbook of Effective Transit Marketing Aids, Pittsburgh, PA: July 1, 1981.

Robinson, Richard K. and Lovelock, Christopher H. (eds.), Marketing Public Transportation, Policies, Strategies and Research Needs for the 1980's, Chicago, IL: American Marketing Association, Proceedings Series, 1981.

Ross, Harry and Curtis, Ellen Foster, Essentials for Success in Transit, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, Division of Research, School of Business, 1979.

Sewell, W.R. Derrick and Coppock J.T. (eds.), Public Participation in Planning, London: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., 1977.

TTC, Quarterly Performance Measurement Report, Toronto: TTC, February, 1983.

Warrington, John E., "How to Develop Organize a Marketing Department," in U.S. Department of Transportation, National Transit Marketing Conference, Proceedings, Washington, DC: U.S. DOT, Urban Mass Transportation Administration, Office of Transit Management, September 1975, pp. 126-131.

Zaltman, Gerald and Jacobs, P., "Social Marketing and a Consumer-Based Theory of Marketing," in Woodside, Arch G., Jagdish N. Sheth, and Peter D. Bennett (eds.), Consumer and Industrial Buying Behavior, NY, NY: Elsevier Nor -Holland Inc., pp. 399-408.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Discussions for purposes of this thesis were held individually with the following MBTA staff: Doris Dorsey, Ralph Fitzmaurice, Jean Holbert and Karla Karash, March-April, 1984.

Discussions were also held with Representative Mary Jane Gibson, Massachusetts House of Representatives and LewJean Holmes, MBTA Advisory Board, April, 1984.

Information was also used from conversations with staff at the MTA in New York and SEPTA in Philadelphia, although information for this thesis was not the reason for these contacts.