

CITIZEN INPUT - THE CONSUMER HAS A VOICE IN TORONTO, by A. J. Gallo,  
Manager-Marketing and Community Relations, Toronto Transit Commission

First, a comment on the overall title of Session 172: "Citizen's Advisory Committees-Bonus or Boondoggle". As it is not unusual in the case of presentations such as these, the speaker will check the dictionary to verify the meaning of the title. I first checked the Concise Oxford Dictionary of current english. I have the fourth edition, which was first printed in 1950. I could find no reference to the word "boondoggle" is a distinctly American word. The meaning, according to the latest edition of Funk and Wagnell's Standard College Dictionary is, "to work on wasteful or unnecessary projects or useless work". The work is described as "U.S. informal". It is a marvelous word and very descriptive of its meaning. I would like to strongly suggest that citizen input is a "boon" and not a "boondoggle".

The theme of my presentation, focus groups -- is only partially descriptive of the wide variety of ways in which the Toronto Transit Commission gains input from our various publics.

These include, in addition to focus groups, major public attitude surveys, regular commission meetings, public meetings, ad hoc private meetings, sessions with neighborhood and retepayer groups and, via complaints, commendations and suggestions.

I believe I am correct in saying that the major difference between Canada and the U.S. is that citizen advisory committees and public meeting are required by law in your case, while they are generally voluntary in ours. We see the benefits and the need for such activity. In fact, we would be considerably less efficient without them. One key way through which we gain public input is focus groups. We use focus groups extensively at the TTC to gain input from both the public and our employees. This helps us to develop programs which will be in the public interest and serve the needs of our riders. The benefit of focus groups is that we can isolate specific issues and discuss these in detail, in a controlled environment. Generally, the focus groups are used to develop hypotheses for further quantifications; however, there are cases where the results are so clear-cut that the input from the research, plus good old-fashioned common sense, allows for immediate action.

One such case was the Student I.D. Program, which we introduced in September 1983. in Toronto, all students are required to carry a photo I.D. in order to be eligible for half fares. This was originally introduced in 1977 as a means of reducing losses resulting from use of student concession fares by individuals not qualifying. Up until that time the card were relatively easily obtained and did not carry a photo identification. It was estimated that the saving as a result of the introduction of the photo I.D. was in the order of \$1,000,000 annually.

In 1983 a survey indicated that relatively few students were actually showing their card and operating staff were not insisting that the be shown. There was also an increase in the level of confrontation between students and staff. Our operators and collectors requested that the 100% enforcement system be instituted.

Prior to the implementation of this system, a series of focus groups were held with students, paraents, and operating staff as well as interviewing school officials. Since it would be necessary for students to pay full fare should the I.D. not be presented, the ultimate result of non-presentation would be that the student other problems which would be duly reported by the press.

The program was reviewed with the various groups, fully expecting a negative response from students, parents and educators. We had one approach which emphaized economy, telling students that they must use their card to save money. The other, more emotional copy platform, stated "we're trying to make sure everyone's fare (fare) is fair (fair). . .we talked to students and they said the only fair fare system was to ask everyone - no exceptions - for their card every time. . ."

Surprisingly, all groups fully supported 100% scrutiny. It was said that many of the problems related to the student I.D. program resulted from the fact that the scrutiny was not consistent. The student who was singled out to show his or her card was embarrassed by the process and students strongly related to the thought that it was not fair to aks only certain students to present their cards. This element of fairness was the common theme with all groups.

The program was introduced with paid advertising campaign in daily newspapers and television, along with school posters, fare box cards and news releases.

The potentially controversial program was introduced with a minimum of problems. With an overall ridership of approximately 1,500,000 daily we received no more than a dozen complaints. Also, the purchase of student I.D. cards increased from 133,000 in 1982 to 156,000 in 1983 and 181,000 in 1984.

Obviously, students were buying the student I.D. because to do otherwise would have required them to pay full adult fare. An additional bonus of the focus groups was that operating stall were particularly impressed and appreciative of the face that management were asking their opinion on the Student I.D. program and actually incorporated their suggestions into the program.

Focus groups are used extensively by TTC to gain public input into the development of programs on specific topics. We are able to focus on specific issues and deal with specific populations, relatively inexpensively, at a cost of approximately \$2,500 per group. We are

currently planning to install a focus group facility at the TTC and will be stepping up our use of this method using in-house facilities and moderators. It should be emphasized that the major disadvantage of focus groups is that they can only provide board direction, and the results are not necessarily representative of the general population. However, used with discretion, they can be an invaluable information source.

The citizens we serve can be an invaluable source of information for the public transit operator. It is not an "add-on" but a fundamental basis for making management decisions in a consumer-oriented company.

While there are some advantages in having consumer panels or formalized advisory committees, there are disadvantages in that the views of those on the committee are not necessarily representative of the general public. The citizens may become "experts" without the "expertise"; and the public nature of the committee's activities encourages grandstanding for the purpose of gaining individual press coverage. I encourage you to consider the less public means of gaining valuable citizen participation and input. At the very least, it will help put the public advisory function into perspective; at best, it may help you build a better transit system

The area served by PAT until a few years ago was one of the world's leading centers of steel-making and related heavy industry. Today it is an area in transition -- from blue collar to white collar. Although the center city is undergoing its second major construction renaissance, unemployment is at a high level. That, combined with losses in population, has caused transit ridership to fall.

The area also is a complex mosaic of hills, rivers and valleys interspersing some 130 separate municipalities served by PAT. It is an area of chaotic and haphazard highways and streets often leading only into deadends. It has more bridges than any comparable urban areas in the U.S. When deteriorating bridges and crumbling streets have to be closed for repair or reconstruction a regular and repetitive occurrence -- traffic gets tied into knots; bus trips have to be detoured, lengthened and slowed. Bus route detours alone cost the Port Authority nearly \$2 million per year.

Add to all of this snow, sleet, ice, rain and excessive heat and humidity, and you have some real problems trying to operate a transit system that will satisfy the needs of everyone all of the time. It is no exaggeration to say that there is no more difficult nor more demanding urban area anywhere in this country in which to run a bus system than Allegheny County. One illustration is the fact the PAT has to operate 162 routes and that is about twice as many as are needed in Philadelphia with its neat grid layout of streets (although the latter [SEPTA] transports three times as many passengers).

What does this mean? If you are a transit manager in Pittsburgh, you have to contend with more dissatisfied customers and communities than you would like. You will have more than your share of complaints and grievances.

And you will not even be able to make a routine trip on your own time to the supermarket without being confronted by demands for more service...or a request for a job.

In other terms, what you have is a community relations problem. The big question in your mind is how best to cope with it -- how to respond to every rider, every neighborhood, every business ever willing to tell you how to do your job. One of the unique characteristics of public transit is that many people who have had only casual contact with the transit system feel they are expert on how and where to run buses.

Over the years, PAT Management has worked with and sought to cooperate with consumer, community, business, minority and other citizen groups, as well as public officials. (In Allegheny County alone, there are close to 4,000 elected officials with whom we communicate.) Out of such informal liaison efforts have come an affirmative action program, a successful minority business enterprise program, modifications in capital improvement programs, computerization and improvement of the route information department, development of a consumer services section, and an aggressive marketing-public relations program.

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