Technology keeps 'L' riders happy

A book will suffice for older passengers, survey finds

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Getting Around

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They may annoy their seatmates, but "L." riders who talk on cell phones, tap out e-mails or listen to music are among the most satisfied CTA customers and likely to keep using the service, according to a new study.

For fast-paced urbanites, it all comes down to making the best use of time while commuting, and for many people that means punching up electronics to stay connected to the world outside, Northwestern University researchers found. Transit agencies who are behind the curve should take notice, they added.

Many of the CTA train riders polled said they want the freedom to be productive or entertained during their commutes. The study found that other riders depend on iPods and other devices to avoid contact with strangers.

Red Line rider Denise Watkins falls into the latter category. The Rogers Park resident works for a Loop graphic arts firm, and her commuting schedule changes based on deadlines.

"Some nights I work past 8 o'clock, when most people have already gone home and the trains are emptier. I wear my earphones before I enter the subway as a sign to tell the beggars to leave me alone," said Watkins, 26.

Whatever the reasons, the ability to use communication and information technologies across the 224-mile rail system is as important to at least half of CTA riders as it is to get to their destination as quickly as possible, according to the results of the study, titled "Private Time on Public Transit." It was based on a scientific survey of 336 CTA Red Line and Purple Line riders, as well as observing the behavior of 400 train riders.

Yet an equal percentage of people who read books and newspapers also rated the CTA as a better use of their time than commuters who don't read during their trip. But this group tended to be older, the study found.

"Using public transit, I am afforded the opportunity to read The New York Times each day," a male survey respondent over age 55 wrote. "As a result, I have read books while on CTA for at least 2,600 hours, which has improved my general level of conversation."

To younger commuters in the survey, the option to maintain a constant electronic lifeline was key to their CTA approval rating. It ranked even higher than whether their train was operating on time.

"We found that connected people — people who are using these devices — are more satisfied generally with the level of CTA service," said professor Hani Mahmassani, director of Northwestern's Transportation Center. "Overall, the level of satisfaction was quite high, almost 4 on a 5-point scale on average."

Mahmassani said attracting new transit customers and increasing ridership in general will depend in part on the CTA and other transit agencies providing customers with more and better access for their telecommunications and information-technology devices.

CTA officials say they get it. The transit agency last week announced an agreement with its sixth wireless service provider. Sprint Nextel will lease use of the CTA's communications infrastructure in the Red Line and Blue Line subways for the next 10 years under a contract expected to earn the CTA $3.1 million, officials said. Service is expected to begin in early 2011.

Sprint Nextel will join AT&T, Verizon Wireless, U.S. Cellular, T-Mobile and Cricket as wireless providers in the subways.

"Giving the customer the ability to either text or receive an urgent emergency call while they are traveling on the system is what people expect," CTA President Richard Rodriguez said. "You'd hate to have a customer use our system and just kind of go with a drop-dead no-communications zone."

The Northwestern survey found that 67 percent of CTA train customers use their cell phones while riding, and 44 percent use audio/video
Of the cell phone users, 47 percent said they send texts or e-mails for personal use, and 21 percent for business. Some 20 percent also make cell phone calls for personal use, while 5 percent conduct business calls.

Cell phones are used by 26 percent of those in the survey to read news, 27 percent to surf the Internet and 10 percent to get travel directions.

The findings may provide a useful road map for transit agencies, particularly as it relates to younger commuters who are still developing their travel preferences and are likely predisposed to drive a car to work than to ride mass transit.

"Can love of the Internet replace the so-called love affair with the automobile?" asked the study's lead researcher, Northwestern graduate student Charlotte Frei, 23.

She thinks so, if the service is high quality and easily accessible.

"A lot of people said they were frustrated that their cell phones cut out when trains went into the subway," said Frei, a Houston native working toward a doctoral degree in transportation engineering. "But others said they were happy to ride the CTA for an hour if they had a book."

The bookworms were also more likely than electronics users to complain that they couldn't find an empty seat on the train, she said.

A number of survey respondents listed "free Wi-Fi" as a top priority for the CTA to offer.

"Wi-Fi would be a huge help," a male between the ages of 25 and 30 wrote in his survey response. "The recent service cuts definitely eat into my time and overall costs, and being able to log on and get a head start on work would be a nice addition."

Asked how soon wireless Internet access might appear on the CTA, Rodriguez said it was largely a matter of funding.

"We've thought about it, and we've looked at it. But at this point the investment we'd have to make would be a little challenging," he said. "I think looking at corporate sponsorships and potentially looking at companies that may be willing to come in and partner with us on something like that is something we are open to."

Buses will be much easier than trains, he said, because the CTA already has outfitted the bus fleet with the global positioning system and wireless communications.

"But nothing's impossible on the trains," Rodriguez said. "As technologies advance, so will we."

This week, the CTA will issue a request for proposals from firms interested in bidding for naming rights and corporate sponsorships of CTA rail lines and stations, bus routes and other assets, potentially including Wi-Fi services.

Metra riders, who spend more time commuting on average than CTA train riders, have cited concerns about lost productivity because of the absence of wireless Internet on Metra trains. But Metra officials contend Wi-Fi is too expensive and technologically challenging.

Other transit systems have figured out a way, including the Massachusetts Bay Commuter Rail Co. and New Mexico's Rail Runner commuter line serving Albuquerque and Santa Fe. New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority is working to procure Wi-Fi providers on the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North lines.

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