

Rubbing out rudeness on public transit

Transit authorities around the nation ramp up efforts to improve manners

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An upside of leaving the car at home and jumping on public transit is all the nice, new people you get to meet.

A downside? All those rude, inconsiderate and bizarre people you'll meet as well. Like the ones Kevin O'Neil describes in the "Breaches of Etiquette" category on his CTA Tattler blog about the Chicago Transit Authority's (CTA) buses, elevated trains and subways.

The blog describes riders "who insist on treating the whole car or bus to their fave tune blaring from their cell phone," the people who think nothing of using a bus or train car to eat a messy meal, change their outfit, put on make-up or clip their toenails, and those folks who insist on taking up two seats (or more) when there are people standing in the aisles.

Well-Mannered travelers might especially enjoy reading the discussion about the "butt pivot," as in "Is it rude to do the butt-pivot rather than stand all the way up when someone wants out [from the inside seat]?" You'll find that filed under "Confronting the Rude Seat Hog".

Not just the CTA

Of course, rude and bizarre behavior isn't reserved for a subset of CTA riders. Mass transit riders everywhere will nod in recognition at the stories about drunk and/or smelly passengers, icky "groppers," loud and obnoxious cell-phone users and those hard-to-avoid "let me tell you my life story" seatmates. And now that more and more folks are giving public transit a try, calls for on-board civility, and the apparent widespread lack of it, is at an all time high.

Are transit agencies taking note? Many are trying to. Others are being forced to.

According to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), public transit ridership is rising faster than it has in 50 years. From April through June, 2008, for example, Americans took 2.8 billion rides on public transit. That is 5.2 percent more rides than during the same period last year. And the numbers just keep going up. All those new riders are not only putting a strain on already cash-strapped public transit systems, they're making already-packed buses, trains and subway cars even more crowded — and making everyone cranky.

Ask 'Cappy' for advice

Pretty much every transit agency has a basic "No eating, no spitting, no smoking" set of guidelines on the books. Over the years, the basics have expanded to include "No loud music without headphones," as well.

Poke around and you'll find most agencies also have an even more detailed set of rules. In Chicago, the CTA Tattler blog describes the rules against gambling, including "any shell-game, sleight of hand or juggling trick ...," and against possessing or carrying a "pistol, revolver, firearm, dagger, ... stun gun ... explosive device or other weapon." And

even though they are spelled out in the rules, it wouldn't be polite to reprint here the list of sexual acts that passengers are forbidden to engage in while riding on a CTA bus or train.

These activities are no doubt prohibited on other public transit lines as well, but these days, many public transit agencies have their hands full with the basics.

The Capital Corridor Joint Power Authority (CCJAP), which operates a passenger rail system in eight northern California counties, created an etiquette campaign starring "Cappy, the Friendly Capital Corridor Conductor" to encourage passengers to follow the rules. "Cappy-copy" appears in system timetables and includes tips and reminders, such as "One ticket, one seat" and "Don't yell on your cell." My favorite: "Personal grooming is just that ... personal! Please use the restrooms for beauty time such as applying make-up, brushing your teeth or other hygiene tasks."

Watch your step in N.Y., N.J.

In New York, the Metropolitan Transit Authority's Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) promotes its "Courtesy Matters" campaign with posters, flyers, and pre-recorded etiquette reminders voiced by New York based celebrities, including TV's Al Roker and Maria Bartiromo, actor Alec Baldwin and New York Giants star Osi Umenyiora. "We believe that using famous people to deliver these messages, helps refresh passenger attention," LIRR spokesperson Susan McGowan said.

NJ Transit is taking a different approach. Instead of celebrities, the agency is trying to enlist all passengers in a "we're all in this together" courtesy campaign. "Ridership has never been higher," said agency spokesperson Dan Stessel, "and increased ridership puts pressure on all of us to behave well if we want to have a civilized riding experience." So NJ Transit created a series of playful and disarming posters. For example, one poster shows a woman screaming in frustration and a printed message that reads: "Please stow your stuff."

Food for thought — not for eating

While many commuter train lines do allow passengers to bring food on board, most subway lines and bus systems do not. For example, the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority maintains a zero tolerance approach to eating and drinking on the Metrorail system. Over the years, the transit police there have made at least two highly publicized arrests of passengers who continued to snack when ordered not to. In one case the offending food was a French fry; in another it was the last bites of a candy bar. Clearly, Metro riders have taken the "no eating" rule to heart: On my last visit to Washington, D.C., a woman leaned over and hissed, "Hey, tourist lady — ditch the biscuit" as we approached the fare box. "They'll ticket you in a heartbeat."

Food is also forbidden on buses in Phoenix, but "It gets darn hot here and in good conscience we can't tell people not to sip water or other non-alcoholic liquids," Marie Chapple of the Phoenix Public Transit Department's said. Instead, the agency developed a "good cup/bad cup" campaign. "Water bottles are fine," says Chapple, but "those papery, waxy cups with flimsy lids" aren't allowed on buses. And while signs on buses clearly outline the rules, the bus operator is usually the one who has to turn back a passenger trying to board with a "bad" cup. "The campaign is helping," says operator instructor Chris Sheaffer, but "at least once a month an operator gets assaulted with a drink. You feel bad telling someone they can't take their \$6 Starbucks drink on the bus or those giant cups of soft drinks." But, he says, a drop may mean stopping the bus to

clean it or putting “people on other buses because the liquid or ice on the floor makes it dangerous for other passengers.”

Quiet, please!

On many commuter trains, the complaints are not about food or drink, but about noise. Following Amtrak's lead, the Maryland Transit Administration provides Quiet Cars on some of its Maryland Area Regional Commuter (MARC) trains. But sometimes people can't agree on what “quiet” means. “We let people know what behavior is expected on the train, but everyone can have a different definition of personal space” when it comes to sound, said agency spokesperson Jawauna Greene. “Even the clacking of keys on a computer can be disturbing to someone who’s trying to sleep.”

That’s for sure: according to Greene, a passenger on a MARC train once objected to how loudly another passenger was turning the pages of his newspaper. Another time, a MARC Quiet Car rider complained to the conductor about the noise two other passengers were making. The conductor investigated and reported back that the two other passengers were deaf and speaking to each other in sign language. The rider still complained: he didn’t like how loudly the other passengers were rustling their clothes while they signed.

No more Mr. Nice Guy

Sometimes being nice just isn’t good enough. That seems to be the opinion in Calgary, Canada where the Calgary Herald reports that, so far this year, transit police have issued CN \$100 fines to more than 230 people for swearing on the C-Train. Nicholas Lakas’s cousin was one of those 230 people. “She was traveling on the train with some friends and got in a heated discussion about a topic she’s very passionate about. She dropped the “F” bomb a few times and then did it again when a transit officer came over to hand her a ticket. She wasn’t happy about it, but she paid it.” Has she changed her ways? “Oh, yes,” laughs Lakas, “She definitely doesn’t want another \$100 ticket.”

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Thanks to Jon Joseph for this entertaining article!