

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION INDEX OF SINGAPORE | AIRLINES

## Full-service airlines still flying high



The survey showed that Singapore Airlines' year-on-year rating level has gone up. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

AIR passengers may be more satisfied with full-service airlines now, but they are still baulking at the service quality of budget airlines.

The most recent quarterly survey by the Singapore Management University's Institute of Service Excellence, covering 1,489 respondents, gave full-service airlines a 74.6 rating out of a possible 100. This is 1.4 points higher than the same poll done last year.

Singapore Airlines, Emirates, Qantas and Cathay Pacific boosted their year-on-year rating levels.

Views on budget airlines, however, were less favourable.

A survey of 1,010 travellers gave budget airlines, including Tiger Airways, Jetstar Asia and AirAsia, a 62.7 rating – three points lower than last year's rating.

The institute's surveys on customer satisfaction cover up to three industry sectors each time.

It surveyed 11,807 people on public education, private education, and the transport and logistics sector between April and June this year.

Budget airline travellers ranked maintenance, food variety and comfort as the most important criteria for a satisfying experience. They were also asked about in-flight entertainment, staff friendliness and their check-in experience.

Since the introduction of budget airlines, passengers' pet peeves include hidden charges, frequent cancellations and failure to give



This feature is brought to you by the Institute of Service Excellence at Singapore Management University (ISES). Featuring findings from the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore, it also reveals insights on leadership and strategy from industry leaders, particularly in leveraging customer satisfaction as a competitive advantage.

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proper notice of changes.

Businessman Ravinder Singh, 42, said: "Travellers are now used to budget carriers so we don't complain about not having food and drinks on board. The problem is that when there are delays or other disruptions, especially outside Singapore, it can be a nightmare trying to get in touch with the airline to sort things out."

Observers said that although passengers pay lower fares on budget airlines, they still expect a certain level of customer service.

Despite all the complaints, passengers have embraced flying on budget airlines.

The market share of low-cost carriers at Changi Airport has jumped from 5.6 per cent of total passenger traffic in 2005 to 25.6 per cent last year. There were 1.8 million passengers who flew on low-cost carriers in 2005, and 11.9 million passengers last year.

These carriers now account for almost a third of all flights at Changi Airport, compared with less than 9 per cent in 2005.

The good news for travellers is that budget carriers have shown some commitment to dispel talk that low fares mean poor service.

Tiger Airways' new chief executive Koay Peng Yen told The Straits Times that the company's focus will be "to try and see things from our customers' point of view" – in particular, what works well for them and what does not.

Over at Jetstar, there is now a dedicated customer service team and a round-the-clock contact centre to deal with passenger complaints.

Budget carrier AirAsia has recently appointed Mr Logan Velaitham as chief executive officer for its Singapore operations.

As country head, he will be tasked with expanding AirAsia's presence in Singapore and Johor and oversee the needs of passengers here.

The airline is also in talks to expand its operations across the region and passengers can expect new planes soon.



Passengers who evacuated a malfunctioning train waiting to board another at City Hall station on Tuesday. A poll on satisfaction with the MRT system found its index dipped by six points to 61.9 points out of 100. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN



Commuters' complaints about public buses include infrequent arrivals, long waiting times and bunching, according to the ISES index. Satisfaction with public buses dropped by 4.8 points to 61.6 points out of 100. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION INDEX OF SINGAPORE | TRAINS

## MRT disruptions in December still fresh in memory

MENTION the MRT system these days and the dissatisfaction among commuters is apparent.

Take a typical commuter, Mr Lai Chin Liang, for instance.

The 41-year-old, who travels by MRT every day from Ang Mo Kio to Raffles Place, is ever ready to rattle off his list of complaints with the rail system.

The trains are too crowded; they are also infrequent and unreliable, he said.

"I have many complaints about the system... I don't even know where to start. They have not done anything substantial to improve the system," said the technology specialist.

A quarterly survey by Singapore Management University's Institute of Service Excellence has reflected this unhappiness.

The institute surveyed 11,807 people on public education, private education and the transport and logistics sector between April and June this year.

Of these, 2,300 respondents were questioned specifically on public transport.

Satisfaction with the MRT system resonated the most poorly among them and saw the biggest fall.

Its index dipped by six points to 61.9 points out of 100, compared with that in the same period last year.

Respondents were asked to rank their satisfaction in areas such as comfort, safety and security, and frequency.

Fresh in the minds of most commuters were the two major disruptions last December.

Mr Lai was one of the 220,000 people who were affected when a stretch of the network went down twice over three days.

Trains also stalled mid-tunnel, leaving some commuters stranded in the dark for almost 45 minutes.

Responding to the index results, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) acknowledged that it will take some time for commuters to regain confidence in the MRT system.

The December disruptions aside, commuters also had to put up with disruptions on the Circle Line and North-East Line (NEL).

In March, some 90,000 commuters were affected by the NEL disruption caused by the snapping of steel cables that kept overhead power lines in tension.

In September last year, the Circle Line went down for four hours due to a faulty cable.

Train operator SMRT acknowledged that the fall in scores for trains may have been because of the publicity surrounding the December incidents and the Committee of Inquiry that followed.

A six-week hearing was chaired by Chief District Judge Tan Siong Thye in which LTA and SMRT witnesses were called.

SMRT added that an increase in ridership due to the population increase was another contributing factor to the dissatisfaction among the public.

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**MANY COMPLAINTS**  
 I have many complaints about the system... I don't even know where to start. They have not done anything substantial to improve the system.

– Mr Lai Chin Liang, 41, who travels by MRT every day from Ang Mo Kio to Raffles Place. He feels the trains are too crowded, infrequent and unreliable

Even though more trains had been added, there was still a limit to the frequency at which trains could run due to constraints in the signalling system, it said.

For commuters, this might mean no significant improvement in their perception of how crowded a train is.

An SMRT spokesman said: "We know operating hours, frequency and comfort are touch points which could have the greatest impact on MRT commuters' satisfaction, so we have been working on improving these with the challenges of our system limitations."

SMRT said it has been working to further improve passenger satisfaction.

It is working with the LTA to upgrade the signalling system, so that trains can run below the current frequency of two minutes.

SMRT said it is also striving to improve how information is being passed on to commuters, such as when shuttle buses are available during disruptions.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION INDEX OF SINGAPORE | BUSES

## Commuters irked by infrequent and late arrivals

IF THERE is one thing that irks commuters when it comes to public buses, it is their infrequent arrivals.

But there are other bugbears too: long waiting times and several buses arriving all at once, a phenomenon known as bunching.

Undergraduate Ronald Shen, 22, takes bus service 70 almost daily from school back home. He said the wait can be quite long, and sometimes two buses would come in a row.

"The frequency is quite irregular," he said. "The wait can be 20 minutes at times, and then the bus that arrives is so full that it can't fit everyone."

A quarterly consumer index released earlier this month by the Singapore Management University's Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) reflected this.

In the survey results, frequency of bus arrivals and punctuality were rated the worst among all factors that determined satisfaction, including comfort of the ride and travel time.

Overall, satisfaction with public buses dropped by 4.8 points to 61.6 points out of 100.

The authorities have taken steps to improve the level of bus services, such as implementing a quarterly review of buses.

Each round of improvements entails deploying bigger buses and adding more trips to popular routes.

Earlier this year, the Govern-

ment went one step further by announcing a \$1.1 billion package to improve bus services.

In an unprecedented move, it will pay for 550 new buses and cover their net operational costs for 10 years. Bus operators SBS Transit and SMRT will add another 250 buses to boost existing bus capacity by 20 per cent.

About 40 new routes will be added, including eight that will run parallel to crowded MRT lines from far-flung housing estates to the city centre.

Last week, Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew provided details of the first phase of improvements to be made under the plan.

Five new routes and more than 90 buses will be added to the bus network here by the end of the year. One such new service is an extension of service 119 from Sengkang to Punggol Interchange.

Since Monday, 28 new buses have been put on the roads during peak periods to improve 26 heavily used services. This includes service 70.

Still, transport observers note that expanding capacity alone is insufficient, as buses are held up by traffic congestion during peak hours.

To that end, Mr Lui said bus priority measures such as bus lanes and the Mandatory Give Way to Buses Scheme will have to be extended.

There are currently 155km of normal bus lanes and 23km of

**"**  
**UNPREDICTABLE**  
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– Undergraduate Ronald Shen, 22, who takes the bus almost daily from school back home. He added that the wait can be quite long, and sometimes two buses would come in a row

full-day bus lanes on the roads here.

An SMRT spokesman said it has taken steps to improve its bus service, such as increasing the frequency of its bus arrivals. Complaints about waiting times dropped by 33 per cent between the second quarter of last year and this year, he said.

The taxi industry also took a hit in terms of customer satisfaction. Its score in the ISES survey fell by 2.4 points to 64.3 points.

ISES director Caroline Lim said commuters had expected more of taxis, possibly due to the fare increases in December last year. However, survey respondents did not see any improvement in service quality.

The Land Transport Authority is currently ironing out the details of new standards to ensure cabs are available when people need them.

It will provide details on taxi availability standards by the end of this year, and operators will have to meet these benchmarks from January.