

# Growing transport grouses not unexpected

## Rising ridership, ageing system add to operators' woes

By **TEH SHI NING**

GREATER dissatisfaction with Singapore's public transport providers, as measured by the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) released last week, was hardly a surprise.

But even as public transport operators SMRT and SBS Transit try to fix this, they face the heightened challenge of renewing an ageing public transport system amid climbing ridership numbers.

The latest CSISG scores for both the MRT and public buses sub-sectors sank to 61.9 and 61.1 respectively from a year ago, significantly below the transport and logistics sector's score of 68.3 and Singapore's national score of 69.1 in 2011.

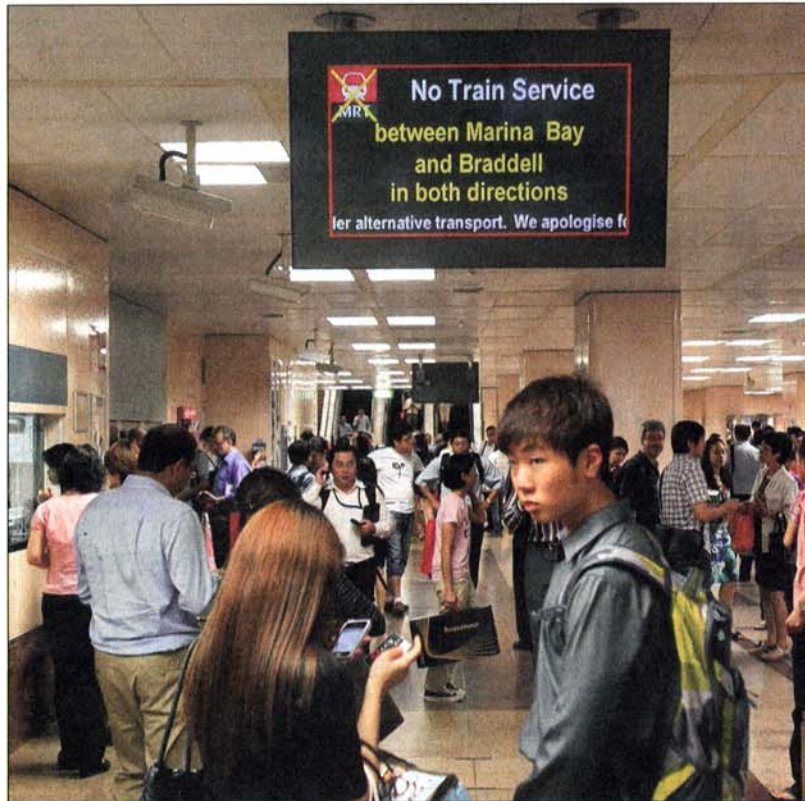
Both MRT operators saw their scores tumble: SMRT's by 6.1 points to 61.5 and SBS Transit by 5.8 points to 63.2.

Even though the data compiled by the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) in producing the CSISG does not track the precise impact of events on its metrics, SMRT says the publicity surrounding the Committee of Inquiry hearing in April, on MRT breakdowns which affected more than 200,000 commuters last December, would have dealt a blow to its score for train services.

Its spokesperson added that the company has also seen passengers associating a March disruption along the North-East line, which is run by SBS Transit, with SMRT instead, which may have hurt its score further.

SBS Transit did not respond to queries.

Delving deeper into data collected in 2,300 interview



FILE PHOTO

**Frequency issue:** More and frequent trains and buses, fewer breakdowns – not the other way round for commuters

with commuters between April and June this year on trains, buses and taxis, the Institute of Service Excellence (ISES) found that comfort and frequency were two aspects MRT passengers were least happy with.

These are areas SMRT is already working to improve. For instance, the frequency of trains has risen and train intervals have been cut to two minutes, SMRT said.

Unfortunately, the public may not have experienced this as commuters sometimes end up waiting longer when unable to board the first crowded train that comes along, SMRT said.

Part of the decline in commuters' satisfaction could thus be due to rising ridership as Singapore's population swells.

"Even though we have been adding more trains to the system over the last year, there is still a limit to the frequency that we can improve to, owing to the constraint of the signalling system. So, there was no significant improvement in train crowdedness," the SMRT spokesperson said.

Upgrading and renewing the ageing system also takes time, SMRT said. But the resignalling project over the next few years should help ease crowded trains and raise its service levels, its spokesperson said.

Dissatisfaction with public transport in general may have tainted respondents' perception of public buses too.

SMRT's score for buses fell by a smaller 2.8 points to 63.9, compared with SBS

Transit's 5.5 point drop to 60.8. But the operator said that it has seen a large increase in complaints about bus drivers. Most relate to "reckless driving and failure to ensure the safety of passengers and other road users".

To tackle the problems, SMRT has implemented sharing sessions among bus drivers – whom the company refers to as "service leaders" – during operational meetings.

Safe driving practices and how to handle customers well are shared at such meetings.

The key challenge in raising bus commuters' satisfaction, SMRT says, is the manpower crunch. "We face difficulties in getting locals to be service leaders, while being squeezed by the foreign labour quota," its spokesperson said.

ISES's analysis of the data found bus passengers to be most unhappy with the frequency and punctuality of buses. SMRT says that it is aware that these are crucial touchpoints and has raised the frequency of buses, with some results. The number of complaints relating to waiting time fell 33 per cent between Q2 this year and Q2 last year.

It has also purchased more buses to add to the capacity of its fleet. Sixty buses equipped with enhanced safety features were delivered from April to July this year, SMRT said.

But the company had reservations about one ISES finding, that customer service is the touchpoint with the greatest impact on bus commuters' satisfaction. SMRT cited other studies that rank safety and security as being "of utmost impact" rather than customer service". But it added that it does pay attention to the latter as well.

ISES's academic director Marcus Lee thinks the best way forward for both public transport operators is to "re-engage their customers".

"Get commuters involved and co-opted into service redesign and improvements. This is effective in shaping their expectations and will help shift the current mindset, that seems to be a very us-versus-them to a more collaborative mindset," he said.

On the latest addition to Singapore's MRT network, the Thomson Line, Dr Lee thinks that those able to enjoy the new service when it is ready will certainly feel happier about public transport as a whole.

However, this assumes that service standards are maintained. "For example, if the introduction of new MRT services means the removal of parallel bus services, then the net effect on satisfaction will be adversely affected," said Dr Lee.