

Bus commuters: still thumbs down

They may have yet to experience the intended improvements of recent public transport investments: ISES. **TEH SHI NING** reports

SINGAPORE'S public bus operators have been buying new buses and introducing new bus routes, but commuters aren't feeling the difference yet.

In the last year, 248 new public buses have started plying Singapore's roads, half the 550 that operators pledged to add under the Bus Service Enhancement Programme (BSEP). New bus service routes, 14 in all, have also been introduced.

These additions have reduced waiting times by up to five minutes for existing bus services, and have cut the number of services with persistent crowding during peak hours by 40 per cent, the Land Transport Authority said earlier this month.

The BSEP has been rolled out more quickly than planned, and LTA expects another 200 buses to be added to fleets by the end of this year.

However, bus commuters are as dissatisfied as ever, going by the latest Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG) report on public transport. Public buses' score languished at 60.6, a good way below the wider Transport and Logistics' sector's improved score of 72.7, and Singapore's 2012 national score of 69.9.

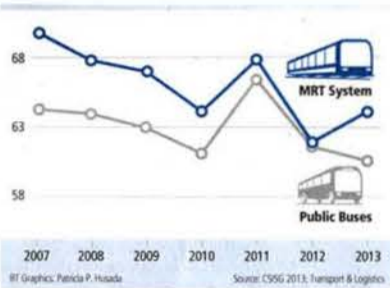
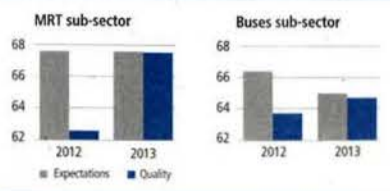
"Perception is reality," said Marcus Lee, academic director of the Institute of Service Excellence at the Singapore Management University (ISES). "Perhaps bus commuters have not yet experienced the intended improvements with these investments."

The CSISG survey, which polls customers in a couple of sectors each quarter, asked commuters how satisfied they were with specific aspects of their bus rides. Despite shorter waiting times and less crowded buses, factors such as "ride comfort" and "frequency" showed no improvement from a year ago. Unfortunately, these also had a significant impact on how happy passengers are - hence the weak scores.

SBS Transit, which operates the majority of bus services in Singapore, scored a lower 60.1 than SMRT Buses' 62.2. Both showed no

Trains vs buses

CSISG scores



significant change from a year earlier.

SBS Transit's senior vice president for corporate communications, Tammy Tan, said: "Surveys, of course, help us to better gauge customer satisfaction but, at the end of the day, they are not the reason we try to do better."

"The Bus Service Enhancement Programme and our continued investment in not just hardware but software, manpower and training, will hopefully further improve the overall customer experience," she added.

There are hints of improvement though, that ought to encourage the public bus operators to press on with their efforts, said ISES' Dr Lee.

The survey's "recency" metrics, which capture how respondents grade the perceived quality of services offered, showed slight improvement.

But the jump in perceived quality was far more significant for the MRT/LRT sub-sector, propelling scores upwards.

SBS Transit Trains, which operates trains running along the North-East Line, saw a significant leap of four points to 67.3. The sub-sector as a whole saw some upward adjustment to scores, though the change was statistically insignificant too, ISES said.



Waiting times reduced: In the last year, 248 new public buses have started plying Singapore's roads. New bus service routes, 14 in all, have also been introduced. These additions have reduced waiting times by up to five minutes for existing bus services. PHOTO: FILE

For trains, ride comfort, frequency and punctuality were the top factors that altered passengers' perceptions, no surprise given the higher occurrence of train breakdowns and delays in recent years.

SMRT said that although it does not measure qualitative customer perceptions, it does collate information to gauge commuters' sentiment. For instance, the company assesses the content and tone behind mentions of SMRT in the media and on social media, and has in place a system to track the number of commuter complaints and compliments about trains plying the North-South Line, East-West Line and the Circle Line.

To open up more channels of communication with customers, SMRT recently launched its Facebook page and a dedicated app titled "Here to Hear" to collate customer feedback. These are to prevent commuters from facing added frustration at not being able to share feedback efficiently.

But as with the bus companies, MRT operators have made fresh investments into operational performance, service and reliability, such as maintenance and engineering works. "We are also strengthening our predictive and preventive maintenance capabilities," said Ms Boey.

There are other matters commuters can help with too. "Examples of this could range from adopting positive travel behaviours - standing left on escalators, helping the needy - to their understanding when we conduct maintenance works," she added.

But it is in the company's interest, after all, to deliver both operational and service excellence. "Lacking in either not only impacts customer satisfaction, it directly impacts purchasing decision, as well as brand reputation," said Ms Boey.

ISES' findings also show that public transport operators need to mind the gap between customers' expectations and the level of quality delivered. The good news is that this gap has narrowed from a year ago.

Operators will have to ensure that this is driven by higher quality standards, and not lowered expectations. "Factors like negative past experience, negative word-of-mouth, and, or, negative media publicity, could lead to lower expected quality. This could in turn result in lower customer satisfaction when respondents further perceive inferior quality," said Dr Lee.



Thumbs up: There was a jump in perceived quality for the MRT/LRT sub-sector. Ride comfort, frequency and punctuality were the top factors that altered passengers' perceptions

