



# Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

## What Every Driver Needs to Know: Basics of Customer Service

By Anne Lowder

**T**ransit managers wear many hats. There is a different hat for managing grants, working on the budget, handling customer complaints, providing supervision, reviewing maintenance records, coordinating routes and working with city or county commissioners. Where does your driver's-training hat rank among all of those?

As a manager, your driver's training hat needs to be Number One. Remember, your drivers are the people from your agency the public sees every day, and the people they rely upon for their safety. They expect your drivers to be professional trained.

### **A driver has several hats, too**

First, the professional driver must provide a safe ride which is the combination of proficient defensive driving skills, efficient top-to-bottom vehicle inspections (pre-trip, on-route and post-trip), competent use of the lift, ability to operate and use all safety equipment on the vehicle, and ability to drive in a variety of road conditions.

Aside from the technical aspects of the job, the driver must respect the customer and honor the customer's desire and right to be treated fairly and honestly.

### **My driver drives well, but...**

As manager, you may know how you can train a driver to drive the bus, but what about customer service?

Every driver needs to know what providing excellent customer service looks like and feels like. Basically, excellent customer service in transit is no different



*This driver's friendly demeanor helps riders feel valued and appreciated.*

than excellent customer service received at a bank, restaurant, or anywhere else. The customer wants to feel valued, appreciated and well cared-for. Training a driver to become a professional driver is giving him or her the tips and strategies to provide consistent and excellent customer service.

Peter Schauer of Peter Schauer Associates provided some great guidance on the importance of a comprehensive driver training program and its relationship to agency customer service at the CTAA Expo in June 2011. Learn more about what makes for a great driver training program by looking at what he shared about the Rhode Island Paratransit Authority (RIPTA) program.

### **Sympathy vs. empathy**

Schauer said the customer service component of RIPTA's training includes two keys to providing excellent customer service as a professional transit driver: 1) knowing the difference between sensitivity and empathy and 2) controlling the "lizard brain." (See the sidebar on page 3 for a description of lizard brain.)

RIPTA's trainers explain to the drivers the difference between sympathy and empathy. The mark of a professional driver is to be empathic without being sympathetic. Sympathy is feeling sorry for someone. Empathy is understanding someone's feelings. RIPTA's driver's handbook teaches the skills to be empathic to customers while still

following agency guidelines.

The object of excellent customer service is safe, high quality, uniform service. Professional quality customer service requires behavioral training about empathy vs. sympathy that is applied uniformly by every agency employee. Will all riders appreciate the uniformity? No. A professionally-run transit service, though—one that consistently follows agency policies, ADA guidelines and safety regulations—conveys professionalism to the customer and that will be appreciated.

To illustrate an example of when uniformity is needed, here is something I often hear when I am out in field. An agency has curb-to-curb service. Joel and Susan have both been trained and understand curb-to-curb service. Yet, Joel always walks Mrs. Martin beyond the curb to her door. Then one day Susan fills in for Joel and provides the “actual” curb-to-curb service. Mrs. Martin becomes upset with Susan—for following the policy. And that’s not fair. The service Joel provides should be the service Susan provides, and visa versa; no more, no less.

### RIPTA training levels

The Rhode Island Public transit Authority (RIPTA) breaks down their training into levels of proficiency: gold, green, pink, and blue. Each level of training provides the driver with strategies for providing excellent customer service.

Because some essential work of a driver is performed independent of supervision, drivers need to learn how to interpret and apply agency policies when on the road. RIPTA’s gold out-of-service training level start with an in-depth review of the agency’s driver’s handbook that contains the agency’s policies and regulations. The handbook specifies what, how and which services are to be provided by the transit system. It tells the operator what rules and policies the customers must follow, as well as what rules the driver must follow. Gold training also includes a thorough review of the vehicle, lift, GPS equipment, and more.

RIPTA’s second tier is the green out-of-service level, presented by a knowledgeable driver. In addition to being able to drive and use the equipment properly, the trainee is

## What every driver needs to know quiz...

1. The object of excellent customer service is service that is:

- a. S \_\_\_\_\_
- b. H \_\_\_\_\_
- c. U \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Uniformity means: (Circle two.)

- A. All drivers must be the same height.
- B. Everyone must train the same way. Do not teach short cuts.
- C. Do not do favors for riders. Follow the rules and treat all riders the same with dignity and respect.
- D. Never take a street that you have not traveled on before.

### 3. Adults learn by:

- a. Using their \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_ their skills.

### 4. The most important question to ask yourself in any interaction with another person is:

- a. What are we going to have for lunch?
- b. What is your dog’s name?
- c. What do I want to have happen?
- d. What is your favorite color?

### 5. In some cultures, the first person to raise their voice in an argument loses the argument. To avoid the reptile response in yourself or the other person:

- a. Speak with your hands.
- b. Try to speak in the rider’s native language even if you don’t know it that well.
- c. Speak in a loud and clear voice.
- d. Speak softly.

### 6. When you validate the other person, you are demonstrating:

- a. How phony you are.
- b. How clever and funny you can be.
- c. How much you collect for the fare.
- d. Empathy.

Adapted from: Peter Schauer Associates, 2011. “Establishing a driver training program.” 2011 Community Transportation Association Expo, Indianapolis, IN.

Answers on page 3.

verified as being ready for full service after successfully undergoing a series of challenging scenarios to elicit correct behavioral choices (demonstrating lizard brain control). A critical factor in behavior control is prior knowledge about the way things are supposed to be done and to practice the correct behavior.

The final levels of the RIPTA training include the pink level for how to use a manifest, and the blue in-service training level with an experienced driver on board

as the trainee operates the bus and lift with passengers.

### Say YES to continuing education

RIPTA also holds annual refresher and certification trainings and ongoing special topics trainings. Continuing education, at team meetings or monthly training sessions, allows professional operators opportunities to discuss and practice situations in a classroom setting that possibly could happen on a route.



## Do you have a lizard brain?

What is a lizard brain? Think of the human brain as having two parts. The big part of the brain is the “thinking brain.” The smaller part of the brain, the hypothalamus or the “lizard brain,” coordinates hormonal and behavioral rhythms such as fight or flight and getting a mate. Everyone has a lizard brain, and too often, in stressful situations people react using that part of their brain, with less than desirable results. The goal for a professional driver is to stay in the thinking brain.

An important step to that end, suggested in *Dinosaur Brains: Dealing with All Those Impossible People at Work* by Albert Bernstein and Sydney Craft Rosen, is to remember that there is always time to stop and think. No one is going to get angrier if you say, “Wait a minute, I need to think before I answer.” Another tip is to ask yourself: “What do I want to happen?” Think the situation through carefully.

Other tips are to keep a soft voice and validate the customer’s request by paraphrasing or summarizing the customer’s statement. Use phrases such as: “If I understand correctly...” or “I hear you saying...” (and then repeat what they have just said). Or you can say “I have heard you identify these three concerns (name them) that frustrate you about how we ...”

A professional driver has the ability to stay in the thinking brain if properly trained, and with thorough knowledge of the agency’s services, policies, and regulations—and the reasons for them.

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Schauer said the goal of continuing education is to provide the operators with “concerted control.” Concerted control is making the drivers accountable for their actions by giving them the blueprint to make good decisions. Working with your drivers to use their thinking brain requires them to visualize, talk, hear other drivers and practice scenarios to sharpen and retain their empathy skills. Adults learn by using their senses, and the more senses involved in a training session, the better the adult will understand and connect with the learning objective.

### What the customer really wants

A professional driver needs to give your customers what they want, within reason. What does a customer want? A customer wants a safe and comfortable ride. A customer wants the driver to provide information and assistance to

make reaching destinations less complex. Most customers want consistency (i.e. not getting favors). Customers want a service that is priced right—and it’s not just about the money. It is about what they get for their money—service with respect and sensitivity. And one more thing, and it’s important: The customer wants to ride in a clean vehicle.

### Your professional drivers need training

What does every driver need to accomplish the basics of customer service? In sum, it starts with solid training. Schauer says that no driver should be left behind. Drivers should be trained on what they should know. A professional driver needs to provide a safe and comfortable ride. A driver should know the limits of providing assistance to riders. A driver needs to know that an important part of being

a professional driver goes beyond the technical skills of operating the bus and equipment to providing professional customer service. A driver should have the resources and support materials for all of the above. Your professional drivers need an agency handbook that outlines the policies and regulations of your transit agency.

Past *Kansas TransReporter* articles (e.g. October 2006 and April 2009) provided ideas on how to recruit, compensate and retain good drivers. Professional drivers are not born, they are trained. Your drivers need the training that makes them a professional. Now that’s top hat. ●

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## Sources

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