



VIEWPOINTS | 2019

HNTB expert:

**Diana Mendes**

Mid-Atlantic Division President

## Understand your customers' needs and they'll say *yes* to transit

*Ridership and satisfaction get a boost when transit agencies focus on enhancing the customer experience*

Across the nation, transit leaders face complex challenges as they strive to enhance their systems and services while adapting to private-sector innovations currently disrupting the transportation industry. Yet, this upheaval places transit agencies in a unique position to seize opportunities as they emerge – by rethinking and refining their services and plans to reflect a customer-centered viewpoint.

Beyond providing reliable and affordable service, transit agencies strive to meet mobility needs of all potential riders, by ensuring easy access, convenience, affordability and safety. Such a vision has long been difficult to achieve due to the gap between fixed-route transit options and individuals' unique points of origin and destination. But, with increasingly prevalent Transportation Network Companies such as Uber and Lyft, and technologies that help people orchestrate transit access, now is our chance to elevate transit's value to its highest level ever.

Here are a few ways ("five E's") that may help transit agencies gain greater insight into people's travel needs, common obstacles and what they value most:

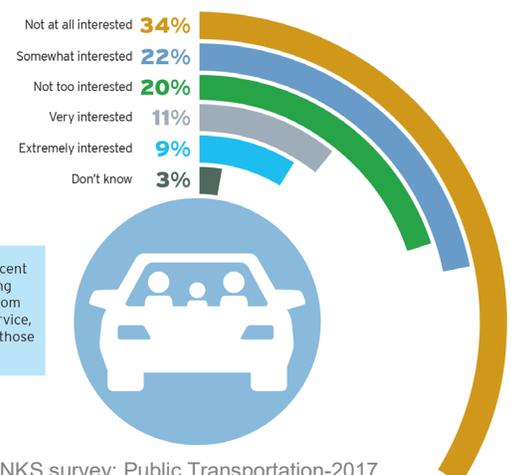
- Envision door-to-door trips** – Look beyond the map of existing transit routes to consider partnerships to accommodate the entire trip individuals make every day. Imagine certain types of riders – such as a daily commuter, a parent with two small children, or a senior citizen – standing at their front doors, about to embark on a trip. Where are they headed? What factors are they weighing as they consider using transit? For some, speed and predictability might be critical, while for others cost or safety might be concerns. For all, time savings by integrating trips and payments can be a motivating factor. Also, how simple is it for riders to plan their trips using online tools? By envisioning people's travel goals and real or perceived hurdles, we

can refine (or redefine) services to bring people a few steps closer to saying "yes" to public transportation.

- Emphasize convenience and comfort** – People who use rideshare services often remark on how easy they are: they know exactly when the car will arrive and what the ride will cost, and they pay with one tap on a device. Most transit agencies are still working toward this level of simplicity, although some have made multimodal trips more seamless through integrated fare systems and real-time arrival/departure information pushed to people's smartphones. Beyond these technology enhancements, we can do more to emphasize rider comfort, from boosting safety and lighting in stations and stops, to helping them work in comfort with amenities such as power outlets and Wi-Fi.

### RIDE-SHARING

How interested would you be in using some form of ride-sharing to get to or from a public transportation service in the future?\*



Among millennials, 63 percent would be interested in using ride-sharing to get to or from a public transportation service, versus 28 percent among those 35 and older

\* Total who have access to public transportation.

- **Experiment with flexibility** – TNCs seem to appeal to the public mainly due to their on-demand availability (no prior planning needed) and the lack of a fixed route. Naturally, trains have fixed routes, but buses have fewer route restrictions and are ripe for innovations that can harness this flexibility to boost ridership. Perhaps weekend service could be added to a route typically only run on weekdays, accommodating people who work, shop or visit family on the weekend. In certain areas, buses can even provide front-door or nearby pickup by allowing for on-demand point deviation, when bus drivers can respond to rider pickup requests within a narrow band of their main route. Start with a pilot – it costs little and may reap major benefits.
- **Engage the public openly and often** – Traditionally, transit agencies have reached out for public input mainly when they were considering service modifications or new investments. This kind of engagement is very important, but agencies really should be in a constant dialogue with the public to understand their needs, learn what’s working (and what’s not), and get clearer on the ways transit lends unique value to them. It is critical to engage heavy users like commuters to increase transit’s viability as part of a region’s multimodal transportation network, but also strive to include a broader universe of stakeholders, such as social service organizations, school administrators and other interest groups. Through such interactions, many breakthrough ideas and synergies come to light. An added benefit: people who have never used public transit, and who may have a mental barrier about trying it, may get a clearer picture of how the system can work for them personally. They will be more likely to explore their options, gain experience with transit and even vote for ballot initiatives that support enhancements to the transit experience.
- **Employ the right data** – Whether you crunch your numbers using outside consultants or inside expertise, make data a vital part of how you evaluate and improve the customer experience. Good data provides insights into customer behaviors, and helps predict how these behaviors might change in the future based on your agency’s decisions today. How do you get better data? Ask for it. After all, millions of people share their locations with ridesharing companies every day. Experiment with collecting location data to learn more about where your customers begin and end their trips. Asking the right questions also can help you discover the reasons behind each poorly rated transit experience. Of course, the public is more willing to share where they are and what they’re thinking when we protect their privacy. Through a careful, transparent process, transit agencies can encourage customers to allow their location data to be harnessed to improve service. More broadly, the American Public Transportation Association may be able to amass a nationwide repository of such vital rider data that agencies can analyze and use to boost rider experience. And, let’s not overlook the potential of working with the wireless carriers, who could ask users up front to agree to share their travel patterns with transit providers as a way to improve their quality of life through more informed transit services.

As we consider and implement ideas for improving the customer experience on transit assets, it is necessary to integrate TNCs and other service providers into our thinking. There’s no doubt that TNCs compete with certain public transit offerings, and they hold the key to providing seamless, convenient door-to-door mobility for people from all walks of life, in a wide range of communities. The key to such integrated mobility – the smartphone – is in the hands of three out of four people, including two out of three people with incomes below \$30,000, according to Pew Research. This represents a tremendous opportunity. Transit agencies must continue to play to their strengths – offering efficient, reliable and safe transportation options on a mass scale – while creating partnerships with TNCs to close those first- and last-mile gaps in people’s trips.

Envisioning an improved mobility network will keep customer experience top of mind – and the response from riders will be greater engagement, increased system usage and their enduring support of transit initiatives at the ballot box.

**About the Author**

*With 33 years of comprehensive experience in transportation and public transit, Diana Mendes serves as Mid-Atlantic Division president. She is a highly accomplished transit professional, having served as HNTB’s transit and rail market sector leader and in boards and committee leadership positions for several professional associations. She currently is responsible for overall growth, operations and client service in Pennsylvania; Virginia; West Virginia; North Carolina; Maryland; Washington, D.C.; Delaware; and South Carolina.*

**HNTB expert contact information:**

**Diana Mendes**  
 Mid-Atlantic Division President  
 HNTB Corporation  
 (703) 253-5885  
[dmendes@HNTB.com](mailto:dmendes@HNTB.com)