

STAFF REPORTS | SOCIAL MEDIA

Tweets comfort to SEPTA riders

The agency increasingly uses social media to get the word out about problems or delays.

By John Timpane
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Information is now a core of our business," says Kim Scott Heinle.

He is assistant general manager of customer service at SEPTA. You'd think he'd be talking about snow and ice, bus detours, dead equipment, backward-rippling train delays. But here he is, talking like some IT guy:

"It used to be just running buses, trains, and trolleys, but now it's information, too."

"Our riders want it," says Ron Hopkins, assistant general manager of operations. And they want it "in real time."

Social media have trained us to expect instant info. James Siler, customer service technology supervisor, monitors the SEPTA Facebook page and oversees SEPTA's two-way tweets with customers 24/7 on the Twitter account @SEPTA_SOCIAL. "One person sent us a tweet," he says, "and two minutes later, she tweeted us, saying, 'You're too slow.' I guess two minutes was too long."

This is the story of how SEPTA joined the modern media age, and what difference that makes.

Social media have made a big difference to SEPTA, pinpointing problems, and letting SEPTA address them and get word out faster. As for commuters, social media inform them, which can mollify the stranded and help them make decisions. (See my experience, below.) And they provide a human response to questions, news, or cries of agony.

It's not perfect, but it's better. In 2008, SEPTA had its command center on the 19th floor of its Market Street offices, an enormous Houston Control-type array of screens that track every bus, train, trolley, and subway car. But its website was dinosaurian (it reloaded only every 20 minutes), and there was no Twitter.

The way info got around was ... analog. "Dispatchers and managers in the field, the ones who had to deal with difficulties, might or might not phone our control center, who are already getting bombarded with custom-



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Eileen Matos, SEPTA social media specialist

At SEPTA headquarters, Ronald Hopkins, assistant general manager of operations, at a screen showing rail operations in real time. APRIL SAUL / Staff Photographer

er phone calls," Hopkins says, "and the info was often stale and wrong — and soon you'd hear it on news radio, totally wrong."

In 2008, Mike Zaleski, now director of emerging technologies, started @SEPTA, the one-way Twitter feed that pushed out to the world all announcements from the main SEPTA website.

"People started tweeting back to @SEPTA," Heinle says. "They wanted a two-way, conversational account." So, in January 2013, @SEPTA_SOCIAL was born.

There's a separate account (@SEPTA_BUS) for bus lines, eight accounts for trolley lines, and one for each train line. I, a Trenton train commuter, follow @SEPTA_TRE. About 39,027 people follow SEPTA accounts. As of this writing, @SEPTA has 27,438 followers, and @SEPTA_SOCIAL has 4,246. And last October, the SEPTA app debuted. It has been downloaded 56,771 times.

All announcements are posted to the website, to specific Twitter

accounts, and also out in text messages via SEPTA's partner, the city's ReadyNotifyPA. Jim Fox, chief officer of the control center, says, "Our lapse time is getting very near to real time."

I can attest to the impact. On Friday, Jan. 3, oh frozen day, I was among the hopeful stranded at the Trenton Transit Center.

I looked up at the info board. Nada.

Also no train. So I downloaded the SEPTA app. A pop-up alert told me tales of woe, cancellation, and delay.

A system map on the app showed — cool — little train icons moving, or not moving, up and down tracks. I got a sense of what was and wasn't coming.

@SEPTA offered a flow of announcements. On @SEPTA_SOCIAL, passenger Ruohong Cai of Princeton University asked: "I am on #8749, stopped near Bristol for about 40 mins. When can we move again?" The tweetback: "Very sorry Cai. Crews working as

quick as possib to resolve. Snowball effect of temp affecting equip & Police Activity @ Trenton."

At least I knew.

Info makes you feel different about bad news. Less powerless. I made plans to work at home.

Eileen Matos is a social media specialist at SEPTA. With her teammates, filtering Twitter traffic by keyword, she monitors tweets about SEPTA and answers tweets on @SEPTA_SOCIAL. Her computer screen is full of tweets, on the social media management system HootSuite.

"When they first tweet you, they're upset," Matos says, "like, 'Where is my train?' or 'Why is my train late?' But sometimes we can turn their mood around when we can tell them something."

With up to 60 trains running at peak hours, 124 bus routes, plus trolleys and subways, the info-logistics are mind-numbing. "Circuit by circuit, we know in real time where every SEPTA train is," Fox says, "except for the 30

percent of SEPTA ridership that uses Amtrak tracks."

That info gets sent to Amtrak offices in Wilmington or New York and then relayed to SEPTA. But all sides are working toward real time. All buses have GPS, so their position is known instantly. But it's still a forbidding task to funnel information on 124 bus lines to commuters somehow. (ReadyNotifyPA says it can't create 124 separate feeds.)

So improvements remain to be made. But six years have brought profound changes.

"I think you're seeing the paper schedule fade into obsolescence," says Bill Zebrowski, senior director of information technology. "With my iPad or iPhone, I can see my position and my train's position. I can get the view every commuter wants."

Even when it's not the view — brrr — the commuter prefers.

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