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Courtesy goes a long way, new CTA campaign advises riders

By Jon Hilkevitch | May 27, 2015



A placard urging train riders to keep the volume reasonable on their music players is among 13 humor-tinged but pointed messages being rolled out in the CTA's new courtesy campaign. (CTA)

'Your maid doesn't work here,' CTA declares in campaign against mass transit vices
Sloppy eaters on CTA trains and buses, loudmouths, litterbugs, seat hogs, door blockers and assorted other misfits have for at least several years been lambasted by other riders venting their outrage on social media, but now the transit agency is joining the conversation in hopes of encouraging more civilized behavior.

CTA officials on Wednesday will launch a long-promised "courtesy campaign" aimed at making transit trips more comfortable and safer.

Thirteen humor-tinged but pointed messages addressing various behaviors unbecoming a CTA rider will start appearing on unsold advertising space aboard buses and trains and at rail stations, officials said Tuesday.



One placard shows an image of train riders buried deep in trash, accompanied by text: "Your maid doesn't work here. Please don't leave your crap behind. ... " The message adds that trash ends up on tracks and causes fires.

"You're not the CTA's DJ," another caption states, urging riders to "Keep your personal music player personal." The courtesy ad's photo shows four riders squeezed into center-facing seats inside a rail car. One man has a boombox hoisted onto his shoulder, set at such high volume that it is blowing the riders' hair and sending one man's hat flying off his head.

And "Remember, your mother was pregnant once," says another ad, showing the belly of a standing mom-to-be pushed up against the face of a man seated and staring into his cellphone. It is headlined: "Ride with heart. Won't you offer your seat?"

The informational placards pointing out discourteous behavior have come a long way from the "No smoking/No spitting" decals that years ago adorned the walls of CTA rail cars as a reminder to keep your saliva to yourself while riding in public.

The new effort, developed in-house by CTA staff, is intended to be an attention grabber and a conversation starter, said Graham Garfield, CTA general manager of customer information. He said that a rider who observes another passenger making life a little difficult for others in the shared space of a bus or a rail car might be more motivated to say something from now on, or at least point a finger toward the informational placard.

"There are certain behaviors that the CTA certainly can and does regulate," Garfield said, referring to potential fines that violators face for smoking, littering and damaging CTA property. "There are other things where people just need to get along and offer consideration to fellow riders."

Some of the messages also serve to let people know that blocking exit doors on trains or attempting to board a rail car before people already on the train can exit simply gums up the works, causing service delays and longer gaps between trains.

One placard, titled "Spread out on the platform," mentions that there are 16 doors on each side of an eight-car train. "Squeezing everyone through the same doors is just a little too cozy for the city of big shoulders," it says.

CTA officials shaped the courtesy campaign mainly by monitoring Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and other social media containing frequent and spirited commentary about CTA customer behavior, agency spokesman Brian Steele said. Calls and emails to CTA customer service and input from agency employees also were helpful, he said.

"We really hope the campaign makes riders think more about their own behavior and that it encourages conversations with other riders," Steele said. He said it's a minority of CTA riders who really need to show better manners and "remember the public part of public transportation."

The top complaints received from social media and elsewhere involved littering, music and radio playing, people blocking rail car doors, loud cellphone conversations, eating and backpacks taking up seat space or riders carelessly banging backpacks into other riders, Steele said.

In its prerecorded onboard announcements and on its signs, the CTA in recent years has re-emphasized that able-bodied riders should not occupy the seats reserved for disabled and elderly passengers; that parents should not block aisles with baby strollers; and that seats should be offered to pregnant women.

But the new campaign is the first broad-based effort at promoting common courtesy since 2002, when the CTA introduced the "Don't Be Jack" campaign, Steele said. The "Jack" posters, reminiscent of the "Dick and Jane" books for schoolchildren, reminded riders about the rules of riding the CTA. "See Jack spray. See Jack pay," warned an anti-graffiti poster.

CTA officials said last December that the act of "manspreading" — when riders, typically male, sprawl across two seats with their legs in a wide V-shape — might be addressed soon by CTA etiquette police. But the new campaign addresses "the more general topic of taking up too much space with backpacks and bags, something we see and hear about with much more frequency," Steele said.

In New York, manspreading on subways is apparently such a problem that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority started a campaign last year to curb the behavior.

The CTA has received two customer calls about manspreading since December, Steele said Tuesday.