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Press Release   April 4, 2012

Metro-North   IMMEDIATE

Scan and Go

"QR" codes debut on Metro-North

A wave of the hand - that's all customers of MTA Metro-North Railroad need to do to view the latest train schedules or access real-time Metro-North Train Time. The response arrives in mere seconds!

The new April 1 timetable kiosk posters at every station now have Quick Response Codes that can be scanned with a smartphone, to get to train schedules or Metro-North's Train Time mobile web page.

And the code can be bookmarked for future use. Most cell phones come with the scanner app already. If not, go the app store associated with your model phone.

The introduction of QR codes for train schedules and status information is just the latest in a long series of improvements in how the railroad communicates with its customers.

"Metro-North defines itself through excellent customer service and in the 21st century, that means excellent communication," said Metro-North President Howard Permut. "We have undertaken many near-term fixes within the existing infrastructure and we will use all available means to advance this goal."

The railroad's entire approach to communication has changed dramatically. In the past, communication was "exception-based," that is, announcements were made only when trains were NOT running on time. With an on-time performance of better than 97% for the past seven years, announcements were few and far between.

But with the explosion of hand-held devices, demand for information has increased exponentially. So information is being pushed out through e-mail (customers sign up for alerts about their line or station), the Internet (www.mta.info) which is constantly updated with information on service improvements and when service is disrupted, and via smartphones.

Metro-North's first short-term innovation was to use existing hardware to tell customers, in the broadest possible terms, the service status (Good Service, Service Change, Delays, etc.) on the web at mta.info , on the screens of all ticket vending machines and on the big departures board in Grand Central Terminal.

Communications hardware, especially electronic signs on platforms, will now receive real time train information. The old signs were installed 20 years ago for the sole purpose of providing a visual version of audio platform announcements, as required by the Americans With Disabilities Act. They were designed to be blank unless there was an audio announcement, which were only made when there was a disruption or delay.

But in 2012, a blank sign is frustrating. People want to know when their train is coming, and on which track and where it is going. So the computer system that controls the signs and the public address system is being replaced. The new digital PA system has vastly expanded capability and will allow automated announcements for every train, whether on-time or late. Of course, a human operator can always make announcements too.

The first-generation monitors at Croton-Harmon, Poughkeepsie and Stamford, are being upgraded. These signs were installed in the 1990s at these busy stations chosen because they have Amtrak connections. Currently they show scheduled trains, but give no indication of actual service. For example, if a train is 15 minutes late, it will simply roll off the sign with no mention that it is late or by how much, (unless it's manually input, which is not efficient during major service disruptions.) By the end of this summer, these monitors will provide real-time train information.

Also this summer, cellular (wireless) technology will be tested at North White Plains, Tarrytown and New Rochelle stations in providing real-time service information to platform and waiting room monitors. (The five stations that currently provide real-time information, Harlem-125th Street, Yankees-East 153rd Street, Fordham, White Plains and Larchmont, are hard-wired, which is more expensive than cellular technology.)

The cellular pilot will determine whether accurate, timely information can be transmitted wirelessly with less need for costly infrastructure.

Other Metro-North initiatives to improve customer communications include:

- Working with other MTA agencies, the call center was consolidated with one phone number - 511 - for all MTA agencies. (Metro-North's Connecticut customers call toll-free 877-690-5114.)

- Working with the New York City Subway, Metro-North was able to bring subway status to Grand Central, which can be seen on the departure board as well as on monitors in the upper and lower level information booths. This project is ongoing with additional subway status signs planned for Grand Central, Harlem-125th Street and Yankee-East 153rd Street stations by the end of the year.
- Last year, Metro-North consolidated distribution of all real-time customer communications with the opening of the new Customer Communications Center and the move of the Customer Information Center to one location in North White Plains to better coordinate messages. The CCC sends out information and the CIC takes incoming calls. Having both functions in one place is more economical and ensures accurate, timely and consistent information to customers regardless of the source, e-mail, PA, station signage, Train Time, CooCoo, internet, social media, and the customer call-in center.
- Train Time, which provides schedules, station stops, track assignments and actual status (on-time, delayed, cancelled, etc.) to smartphones, is continually being refined. CooCoo, the text-based real-time information service, also will be improved.

"I am particularly pleased with Train Time, which was developed by Metro-North employees from several departments to provide real-time train service status using data from the system that controls train movements," Permut said. "Train Time is now available by scanning a QR code and you can save the link on your home screen for truly quick response."

Metro-North's sister railroad, the Long Island Rail Road, also uses QR Codes on its timetables and promotional materials.