



Service

We will consistently provide our customers with excellent travel experiences that exceed their expectations.

Customer service is at the very heart of passenger rail, and it is the heart of the *Moving Forward* plan. VIA's consistent success in the marketplace is the direct result of a commitment to continually refine passenger rail services to enhance the customer's experience, and to deliver that service efficiently, with care and attention to the needs of each customer.

Passenger services are developed and delivered by VIA's regional, cross-functional service teams in Western, Central and Eastern Canada. These teams work closely with the customers, businesses and communities they serve to ensure that VIA's operations reflect and respond to the unique needs of regions across the country.

As a federal institution, VIA plays an important role in promoting Canada's linguistic duality. VIA demonstrates daily its commitment to offer clients quality services, including in their preferred official language.

Regional service teams, and all VIA employees, have made service excellence a key focus of VIA's business strategy, and earned exceptionally high ratings from customers in 2005. In fact, 97 per cent of customers said that VIA met or exceeded their expectations during the year – 57 per cent said VIA met their expectations and, for the second consecutive year, 40 per cent said that VIA exceeded them.

IMPROVING SERVICE DELIVERY

A number of initiatives helped to strengthen VIA's focus on the customer and improve service delivery. Managers increased their on-board presence by riding the trains more frequently, and all employees were given the opportunity to experience VIA service themselves in order to gain a better understanding of the customer's perspective. A new monthly "Customer Focus" newsletter provides all employees with real life examples of service excellence and underscores the impact of good customer service on VIA's performance.

VIA has increased its emphasis on "soft skills" in serving customers. Department, communication, interpersonal skills, planning and organization are essential in shaping a positive travel experience for travellers. These are now more clearly identified and measured in employee performance reviews.

Self-service options for making travel arrangements and purchasing tickets continue to be very popular. In the last two years web sales have almost doubled, reaching \$68 million in 2005 and amounting to 27 per cent of VIA's sales revenues. VIA has begun a comprehensive review of its web site and online reservation systems to make the process even easier for customers. VIA is also reviewing the placement of its self-service ticketing kiosks in key locations throughout the Quebec City-Windsor corridor, to ensure that customers have the best possible access to this service.

REFINING WESTERN SERVICES

VIA's Western transcontinental train, the *Canadian*, celebrated 50 years of service in 2005. In addition to providing basic, year-round transportation between Toronto and Vancouver, the *Canadian* supports Canada's tourism industry by attracting high-yield travellers with its world-renowned *Silver & Blue*[™] class service.

In 2005, the Western Services carried out a complete review of *Silver & Blue* to identify ways to update, refine and improve the experience of customers. They identified 25 specific ways to enhance service, and implemented eight of these during the year, including adjustments to staff training, telephone confirmations of bookings and signage enhancements. Additional improvements will be introduced at the start of the 2006 summer peak season.

IMPROVED SCHEDULES IN THE CORRIDOR

VIA's Corridor-East and Southwestern Ontario Service Teams carried out extensive consultations with customers, communities and major employers to find the best way to fine-tune train departure and arrival times in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor.

For example, in the Corridor-East, morning trains between Montreal and Quebec City now depart earlier to accommodate customers travelling to attend business meetings, and some Montreal-Ottawa trains have been extended to Ottawa's suburban Fallowfield station, eliminating the need for many customers to travel into the city centre.

In Southwestern Ontario, both the morning and evening trains from Sarnia to Toronto now leave slightly later, providing better connections with trains at both London and Toronto. The late evening Toronto-Kitchener train now provides through-service to London. Based on numerous requests from students, VIA also launched an additional train, on Friday nights, from London to Toronto via Brantford.

SERVING MARITIME TRANSPORTATION AND TOURISM

In response to regional transportation and tourism partners' demand for high-quality services in Eastern Canada, VIA launched an enhanced seasonal product on the *Ocean*, which runs between Montreal and Halifax. The new *Easterly* class service was developed in consultation with customers, staff, local governments and the tourism industry throughout the region.

This authentic, interactive rail tour offers a complete *Maritime learning experience*, with customers participating in a variety of on-board activities. Entertainment and educational content is tied to regional culture, history and geography, and the dining experience reinforces the cultural connection, with regionally-inspired cuisine and animated personal service. Inclusive meals and themed cars add further value to this enhanced first-class experience.

Response to the new *Easterly* class after the first year of operation was extremely positive. Customer satisfaction ratings on this route improved significantly, reaching 8.4 out of 10, with the dining experience and the learning component receiving even higher marks. Interest in this product remained high throughout its first season, and an increase in traffic is expected in the year ahead.

In 2005, the new *Easterly* operated from June through October; in 2006, it will be available from May through October, with further enhancements under development.

After an initial adjustment period, customer reaction to the Renaissance cars on the *Ocean* has been positive. In response to customer feedback, a number of modifications are underway to improve heating systems, to provide more flexible seating arrangements in the coach cars, and to add additional luggage racks for customer use.

VIA's Eastern Service Team has been meeting with local associations to enhance the value of rail passenger service to the region. One initiative, spearheaded by Halifax and Moncton front-line employees, was a Remembrance Day train in November. Launched by an honour guard and greeted en route by crowds of well-wishers, the service brought veterans and their families from Halifax to Ottawa to take part in *Year of the Veteran* Remembrance Day ceremonies in the nation's capital.

ON-TIME PERFORMANCE

On-time performance – VIA’s ability to get customers to their destination at the scheduled time – is one of the most critical factors affecting customer satisfaction. In 2005, VIA raised on-time performance to 81 per cent, 11 percentage points higher than in 2004.

This follows a number of years in which performance was declining, due largely but not exclusively to the challenges of mixed passenger/freight operations on existing tracks. CN owns most of the track and infrastructure used by VIA’s passenger trains. In recent years freight traffic has increased, and freight trains have grown longer. Both developments impact VIA’s operations, limiting capacity for higher-speed passenger service and causing frequent delays for passenger trains.

VIA and CN executives maintain ongoing discussions to identify opportunities for improving on-time performance. The improvements achieved in 2005 are the result of joint efforts at various levels of both organizations. Train delays are tracked daily and reviewed every morning to identify the cause of delays. In some cases, VIA is able to solve the problem on its own. In other cases, delay issues are raised in weekly meetings with CN managers to identify causes and find solutions.

In 2005, VIA re-opened its Toronto Maintenance Centre service shop, which had been closed in 1997. This has improved equipment cycling efficiency for trains in the Corridor and will provide better support for on-time performance issues related to equipment maintenance.

While these efforts brought improvement, infrastructure challenges and limitations will need to be addressed to provide lasting solutions and to increase capacity and speed for passenger services in the future.