

Dear Mr. Davis,

July 5, 2014

I was one of your passengers who rode your train (Red Line Run #805) on Thursday, July 3rd, 2014. I normally get off at Morse but since I had my bike and was so strongly motivated to speak to you, I took the train all the way to Howard instead. There I found you entertaining one of your fans and you were perhaps surprised that I was not a fan as well. I told you "I want you to not talk so much." Pointing out that we as customers are urged "when talking on phones, please be considerate so as not to disturb other customers." Certainly you have heard that announcement?

Heading up north with my blood was boiling, I was still conscious enough of the situation to take note of what exactly was irritating me. The main thing that upset me was the sheer volume of comments as if you were made nervous by dead air. If you were a comedian whom people had set aside good money and precious time to go see, this would be understandable. But on a train, dead air is NOT a bad thing. Not at all!

After taking your advice to Google the Friendship Train and recalling you announcing "I may not be the best but I'm almost the best" I found this from the March 31, 2009 article by Christopher Borrelli in the Chicago Tribune. It is about another CTA train operator, Michael Powell, who may actually be the best.

"But he is not a chatterbox. Sometimes he goes a half-dozen stops without a single bon mot. He does not intrude on personal space. He brightens it. He is one of those rare souls who cares enough to loosen the monotony -- and anxiety -- of the everyday by injecting a bare minimum of humanity."

If, as I suspect, you are trying to follow in Mr. Powell's footsteps, you might benefit from taking this paragraph to heart. Note: it is enough to inject a bare minimum of humanity. Anything beyond that feels competitive and spoils the charm.

Also, if you trust me that I want everyone's ride to be more pleasant, and that I commend you for wanting to brighten people's day, you will swallow what might at first seem like a bitter pill. Please don't make the ride about you. You may believe that announcements like "I love people" are full of love, but the ego of the statement (see that big "I" right at the beginning?) could be reduced considerably. Try instead something that makes it about us who, while we outnumber you, must sit (or stand!) like trapped mute cattle in the face of your sharing. Instead, you could try this: "CTA riders are a hale and hardy lot." or "Red Line commuters are the loveliest people in Chicago." Or how about this "If you're from out of town, most Chicagoans are eager to share what they know about their city. If you have a question, raise your hand now and see if it's not true!"

This last one wins all around. First, it takes a huge burden off of you to anticipate (and hence announce) the answer to every possible question. Second it instills a feeling of pride in your regular riders. Third, it makes the out-of-towners feel safe and personally welcome in a way that just hearing your announcements could never achieve. And fourth, it elicits from your riders that bare minimum of humanity that we're striving to nurture.

Please forgive me for dwelling on that bitter pill. When you start a sentence with the words "Now I want you to..." no matter how noble or friendly or playful the suggestion, proud people like me will resent it. There are just so many more charming ways to get a point across that don't involve us doing what you want us to do. For instance, regarding giving up ones seat, the canned announcement may be enough. Prodding and cajoling on your part may only foster resentment. And asking for people to wave at you just makes me embarrassed for you. I know it's not, but it SEEMS like a desperate plea for validation. Again, please don't make our ride about you.

Wrapping up with a few bullet pointers:

- * Avoid religion
- * Respect the ladies, no comments about their physical appearance
- * Stay away from politics
- * Stick to weather, sports, architecture and points of interest
- * Avoid repeating yourself
- * Timely information about connecting trains is like gold. But what hundred north or south or connecting bus routes and numbers are not as helpful or necessary
- * Inform and educate yourself so you can tell us something we don't already know
- * Be funny

In summary, we are your passengers and not your audience members. We appreciate your efforts to bring us together and brighten our day. We get on the train expecting to entertain and inform ourselves and aren't looking for you to baby us. Some of us are in the middle of a great book or grading papers. And most of us take the train all the time.

I hope you find this letter helpful, Mr. Davis. You can see I've put a lot of thought into it and a fair amount of effort to deliver it to you personally and confidentially. Thank you for listening to ME!

Sincerely,

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