

Gold Line Express Focus Groups

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Executive Summary

Metro Market Research conducted two focus group meetings among Metro Gold Line users and non-users to provide Rail operations with input on proposed express service on the Gold Line. The focus groups are a qualitative research technique used to follow up on previous quantitative research such as the Gold Line Before and After Survey and the 2004 Metro Rail survey.

Group Characteristics:

- At least seven of the twelve Gold Line users have a car available for their most frequent trip. These choice riders are an important constituency.
- All but one non-user have ridden the Gold Line at least once, and several use transit more than once a month.

Reasons to Ride/ Not to Ride

- All non-users and several users mentioned the cost of gas/driving.
- When non-users were asked why they do not ride transit for their most frequent trip, several mentioned personal security, excessive transfers (especially at beginning or end of trip) and travel times longer than auto.
- “Trains great but connections are poor or nonexistent”, “It is the local buses that drop my perception of service.”

Trip Attributes

Participants in both groups were asked to rank certain service attributes from most important to least important with “1” being the most important.

Table E1

	Users		Non-Users	
	Average	1 st Rankings	Average	1 st Rankings
Shorter Travel Time	3.1	0	2.3	3
On-time service	1.7	5	2.1	4
Frequent service	1.7	7	2.3	3
Minimize transfers	4.2	0	4.3	0
Better bus service to station	4.4	0	4.1	2

- Users value frequent, on-time service for their transit trips.
- Shorter travel time was ranked third by the user group. In large part, this reflects the quality of the trip. Several mentioned that the Gold Line is a comfortable, stress-free experience, and they don’t mind the length of that segment of their trip.
- Non-users also value on-time service, but they rank shorter travel time equal to frequent service.

Table E2

	Users		Non-Users	
	Average	1 st Rankings	Average	1 st Rankings
Personal Space/no crowding	2.1	5	3.0	2
Cleanliness of train	3.0	1	2.3	4
Station Parking	3.8	1	2.4	6
Real time next train arrival	3.7	2	3.2	0
Seat availability	2.4	3	4.1	0

- Ten of the twelve users ranked their own attribute, personal security, higher than any other attribute. Several users mentioned restricted riding (daytime only) on Metro Blue Line due to perceived security concerns.
- Users rank personal space/lack of crowding on train highest and seat availability as second highest.
- Users ranked station parking last.
- Non-users ranked station parking first more than any other attribute in Group 2.
- Train cleanliness has the highest average score for non-users. Other non-user focus groups have associated bus stop cleanliness with personal security, and this might reflect that view.

Express Service

- All of the users except for one thought the express service was a good idea.
- Only one user cautioned against it, and that was based on perceived reactions of other riders rather than concerns with the service.
- When asked if express service would attract new people to the Gold Line, several users agreed.
- Although non-users rated shorter travel time as their second ranked improvement, they were less excited than users were about the express service.
- Non-users suggested other attributes such as faster speeds and less waiting for transfers to the Red Line and local buses as higher priorities.
- When asked to ignore the express stop locations and assess if the express service concept is appealing, only six non-users said yes and one person (whose stop was between express stops) thought it was unappealing.
- Most non-users thought it would attract more riders.

Conclusion

A number of people in both groups shared the opinion that express service is a good idea, but that travel time on the Gold Line was not critical in their decision to ride the Gold Line. Users tended to cite the comfort and security of the ride while non-users cited poor connections with other transit, long walks at transfer points, and inconvenient parking as more important factors in deciding to take transit.

I. Introduction and Objectives

Metro Market Research conducted focus group research was conducted among Metro Gold Line users and non-users on proposed express service on the Gold Line. The focus groups are a qualitative research technique used to follow up on previous quantitative research such as the Gold Line Before and After Survey and the 2004 Metro Rail survey.

Metro conducted the focus groups for the following major objectives:

- General perceptions of Metro transit services in general and Metro Gold Line in particular by users and non-users.
- Aspects of the Gold Line that are most attractive.
- Perceptions to the proposed Gold Line express service in particular.
- Communications preferences for general trip information and service changes.

II. Composition and Size

Gold Line users and non-users were invited on separate nights for the focus groups. The two groups were recruited separately using two different methodologies. The users group was recruited from a recent Customer Satisfaction survey conducted system-wide in Fall 2004. They were screened for current use of Metro Gold Line. Potential users of the express service would need to commute between San Gabriel Valley and downtown Los Angeles (or nearby) several times a week. The non-users were recruited using the Employee Transportation Coordinators (ETC) from companies in or around downtown Los Angeles. The respondents to the recruiting email consisted mostly of current transit users. This implies that transit users with existing relationships with the ETC, might have been pre-disposed to reply to the invitation for the focus group. As such, the non-user group as a whole had a fair amount of experience with transit in general and all but one had ridden the Gold Line.

A total of twelve users and twelve non-users came to the two two-hour focus groups. Warren Morse, Deputy Executive Officer of Marketing, moderated both groups at Metro's headquarters, the Gateway Building, in downtown Los Angeles. Users met on Wednesday, March 16th and non-users met on Thursday, March 17th. Both groups met from 6:00 PM to 8:30 PM.

The demographics of both groups are presented in Table 1 below. The groups generally represent their segment's demographics except for the 18-24 age group and Asians for the users group.

Table 1: Focus Group Demographics

	Users	Non-Users
Total	12	12
Gender		
Male	6	7
Female	6	5
Age		
18-24	0	0
25-44	8	7
45-64	4	4
65+	0	1
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	6	2
African American	1	2
White	4	5
Asian	0	3
Other	1	0

III. Travel Behavior/ Current use of Metro

Users

At least seven of the twelve users have a car available for their most frequent trip. These choice riders are an important constituency. They are also fairly typical of the average Gold Line rider – in 2004, 40% of Gold Line patrons said that they previously drove before they took the Gold Line for their current trip.

Non-Users

When asked about the benefits of using transit, every single non-user mentioned cost. Many mentioned the cost of gas, while some mentioned parking or general wear and tear on their cars.¹ When asked why they do not ride transit for their most frequent trip, several mentioned personal security, excessive transfers (especially at the beginning or end of their trip) or travel time longer than auto. Others mentioned trip chaining (personal errands) and low frequency of local buses.

Non-User Perceptions of Metro

Non-users were asked to give Metro a grade. The average grade was B-. Comments included “Trains great but connections are poor or nonexistent”, “It is the local buses that drop my perception of service”, “Compared to other big cities and taking into consideration the layout of the County it is pretty efficient”.

¹ It should be noted that the meetings were held during a sharp increase in gas prices.

IV. Ranking Service Attributes

Users were asked to think of the reasons why they ride the Gold Line for their most frequent trip. Non-users were asked what would have to change for them to make their most frequent trip on the Gold Line. The attributes are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Gold Line Service Attributes

Users		Non-Users	
Convenient	Destinations	Route Information	
Scenic	Calling Stops	Parking	
Clean	Environmental	Speed	
Smooth	Artwork	Fewer Stops	
Inexpensive	Bike Accessibility	Synch with Red Line	
Reliability	Luggage Friendly	Moving Walkways	
Security	Seat Availability	Less Walking	
Clientele	Exercise	Better Connections	
Relaxing	Safety		
	Drinking and Riding		

Participants in both groups were then handed a sheet with service attributes and asked to rank them from most important to least important.

Table 3: Group 1

	Users		Non-Users	
	Average	1 st Rankings	Average	1 st Rankings
Shorter Travel Time	3.1	0	2.3	3
On-time service	1.7	5	2.1	4
Frequent service	1.7	7	2.3	3
Minimize transfers	4.2	0	4.3	0
Better bus service to station	4.4	0	4.1	2

Users value frequent, on-time service for their transit trips. Those attributes got all of the first place votes. Shorter travel time was ranked third by the group. In large part, this reflects the quality of the trip. Several users mentioned that the Gold Line is a comfortable, stress-free experience, and they don't mind the length of that segment of their trip.

When asked why they didn't rank shorter travel time higher, many users cited quality of trip and reliability of the train service as factors. One person said the train ride is a "relaxing period from one point to another", which allows her to "let go of that stress from work." Another person said "as long as you've got the reliability factor, you can plan ahead, and you know the train is going to be there at a certain time."

Non-users also value on-time service, but they rank shorter travel time even with frequent service. Although they mentioned transfers as an impediment to using the Gold Line, non-users ranked minimizing transfers lowest with no first place votes.

Table 4: Group 2

	Users		Non-Users	
	Average	1 st Rankings	Average	1 st Rankings
Personal Space/no crowding	2.1	5	3.0	2
Cleanliness of train	3.0	1	2.3	4
Station Parking	3.8	1	2.4	6
Real time next train arrival	3.7	2	3.2	0
Seat availability	2.4	3	4.1	0

Non-users ranked station parking first more than any other attribute in Group 2, but train cleanliness has a higher average score. Other non-user focus groups have associated bus stop cleanliness with personal security, and this might reflect that view.

Users ranked personal space/lack of crowding on train as first. Seat availability, similar to personal space, was ranked second. None of these was characterized as an attribute that would change their behavior. Users ranked station parking last.

Ten of the twelve users ranked one of their own attributes higher than any of the attributes handed out. Six people ranked security highest, two people ranked cost (inexpensive), one ranked smoothness, and one ranked convenience. Security was characterized as a deal-breaker: if they did not feel safe on the Gold Line, they would not ride it. Some users said they either did not ride the Blue Line or rode it only during the daytime due to perceived personal security concerns.

V. Express Service Opinions

Both the users and the non-users were read a description of the proposed Metro Gold Line express service. The users were given an inaccurate initial description of the program at first (4 trains an hour with one being an express, please see the Users Moderator Guide in Appendix A), but that description was corrected during the module.

Users

All of the users except for one thought the express service is a good idea. One end-to-end person said, “That would be awesome.” Only one person cautioned against it and it was based on perceived reactions of other riders rather than concerns with the service. He said he would be frustrated if he were late for work and a train rushed past him to stop at an express station while he was waiting on the platform. All other users were either at a stop designated as an express station or nearby one. One user likened the express service to a bus limited stop route, and that she had good experiences with that service.

When asked if express service would attract new people to the Gold Line, several users agreed. One person said for “people who love to drive their cars, the only thing

that's going to stop them from doing it is an express ride to go anywhere. That's the only thing. Money is not an issue with them."

Non-Users

Although non-users rated shorter travel time as their second ranked improvement, they were less excited about the express service. Many of the non-users were more concerned about which stop was chosen rather than the speed of the service. They also suggested other remedies such as less waiting for transfers to the Red Line and local buses or faster train speeds as higher priorities.

When asked to ignore the express stop locations and assess if the express service concept is appealing, only six said yes and one person (who earlier said his stop was between express stops) thought it was unappealing. Most people thought it would attract more riders. As one person said, "Anything that has express on it is attractive."

Conclusion

As a whole, a number of people in both groups shared the opinion that express service is a good idea, but that travel time on the Gold Line was not critical in their decision to ride the Gold Line. Users tended to cite the comfort and security of the ride while non-users cited poor connections with other transit or long walks at transfer points as more important factors in deciding to take transit.

VI. Communications

Both users and non-users were asked about obtaining information from Metro for trip planning purposes and general announcements/service updates.

Basic Information

Eight of the twelve users get most of their information about Metro services and its proposed plans from Metro.net. Two rely on the radio, one on Spanish language television and one on signs posted at the stations.

Non-users have a variety of ways to obtain information. Several use the Internet. Two rely on word-of-mouth from co-workers and friends. One calls 1-800-COMMUTE, and one studies information at the bus stop/train station.

Better Way to Communicate

All users thought there should be either VMS announcements at stations and on Gold Line trains (instead of the next station information) or audio announcements by speaker at the stations like on the Red Line.

Several users wanted the Internet information improved to include Metrolink-type frequent updates about service delays and changes. All users agreed that printed information as seat drops are a good method.

Non-users had several suggestions for trains and stations. More than one person wanted a uniformed person at each station like in New York City, while another

suggested more maps and posted information about destinations. Other non-users wanted more information on vehicles such as seat drops and bi-lingual brochures. Several agreed that there should be more emphasis on advanced announcements on changes in schedules.

APPENDIX A
(Users Moderator's Guide)

GOLD LINE: TRANSIT USER FOCUS GROUPS

- DISCUSSION GUIDE -

(10)I. INTRODUCTION/OBJECTIVES - Jeff

- A. Welcome
- B. Purpose of session
 - a. Asking for Input and feedback on our services as a whole and the Gold Line in particular
 - b. Focus Groups are one of many research techniques
 - c. Like a structured conversation
- C. Disclosures – video, etc.
- D. Ground Rules
 - a. Truthful and candid
 - b. No right or wrong answers
 - c. One conversation at a time
 - d. Turn cell phones off
- E. Introduce Warren
 - a. Some people in the room helping out
 - b. Warren Morse will be leading the discussion tonight

(25)II. CURRENT USE OF METRO - Warren

A. Let's begin by getting to know each other a little. I'd like to go around the table and have everyone introduce themselves and tell us three things, which are listed on the easel:

1. How often do you ride the Metro Gold Line?
2. How do you get to/from your Gold Line Station?
3. What other transit do you use?

B. OK, you're all pretty familiar with the Gold Line. By the way:

1. How do you normally pay your fare?

(20)III. SERVICE ATTRIBUTES

- A. OK. Now, think about the type of trip you take most often on the Gold Line. For most of you this will be a weekday trip to and from work. Think about some of the reasons why you take the Gold Line for this trip. It might have something to do with the train, it might have something to do with the station, or it might have something to do with the overall trip. Can anyone give me a reason why they take the Gold Line?
- B. (Probe and write down responses. After that, pass out Q.1.) Here's a sheet that lists a number of service attributes in two different categories. Some of them are the same as the reasons you identified, some are not. I'd like you to take a moment to rank how important each item is to you personally within each category. Place the number "1" next to the most important attribute, a number "2" next to the second most important attribute and so forth.
- Train Performance
 - Train and Station Improvements
- C. (DISCUSS Q.1) How did you rank the importance of the service attributes in each category? (Probe for reasons and for the service attributes that are not at all important.)
- D. What is the primary reason you use the Gold Line instead of driving?

(20)IV. Express Service

- A. Some of you indicated that shorter travel times were important to you. What are some of the ways we could shorten the travel times for your trip?
- B. I want to get your reaction to something we're planning. Right now, we run four trains an hour on the Gold Line, 15 minutes apart -- what we call 15-minute headways. We're thinking of changing one of those trains to an express train during rush hours, from 6 am to 9 am and 3 pm to 6 pm. It would make fewer stops and take about 20% less time from end to end. The stops between Sierra Madre and Union Station will probably be Del Mar, Mission and Highland Park. So for five of the stations, the headways would remain every 15 minutes and offer a faster trip. For the other nine stations, the headways would go to every 20 minutes.
- a. What's your reaction to this plan?
 - b. Would this change how you ride the Gold Line?
 - c. Do you think it would attract more riders?
 - d. (Probe) What do you think of the trade-off between quicker travel times for some stations and longer waits at others?

(15)V. STATION AMENITIES

- A. Let's talk for a minute about the stations on the Gold Line. What are some of the amenities and characteristics that are important to you?
- B. (Hand out Q.2) Here's a sheet that lists a number of station characteristics. Some of them are the same as the items you identified, some are not. I'd like you to take a moment to rate how important each item is to you personally.
- C. (DISCUSS Q.2) How did you rate the importance of these station characteristics? Which one is most important to you?

(15)VI. COMMUNICATIONS

- A. How do you currently obtain most of your information about Metro services and its proposed plans?
- B. Do we provide updated information frequently enough for you?
- C. What is the last piece you remember reading from Metro?
- D. Is there a better way for Metro to inform you about future bus service changes and single-track improvements? How would you prefer to get information from us?

(5) VII. WRAP-UP/THANK YOU'S

APENDIX B
(Non-User Moderator's Guide)

GOLD LINE NON-USER FOCUS GROUPS

- DISCUSSION GUIDE -

Jeff will hand out Q.1 as the participants arrive and eat.

(6:30-6:40)I. INTRODUCTION/OBJECTIVES - Jeff

- A. Welcome
- C. Purpose of session
 - a. Asking for Input and feedback on our services as a whole and the Gold Line in particular
 - b. Focus Groups are one of many research techniques
 - c. Like a structured conversation
- C. Disclosures – video, etc.
- F. Ground Rules
 - a. Truthful and candid
 - b. No right or wrong answers
 - c. One conversation at a time
 - d. Turn cell phones off
- G. Introduce Warren
 - a. Some people in the room helping out
 - b. Warren Morse will be leading the discussion tonight

(6:40-7:05)II. TRAVEL BEHAVIOR - WARREN

- A. Let's begin by getting to know each other a little. I'd like to go around the table and have each of you introduce yourselves and describe the one trip you make most frequently in a typical week. For most of you this trip will be your commute to and from work.

- For what purpose?
- How many days per week/weekdays vs. weekends?
- Times of day?
- Mode of transportation used?
- Is this trip relatively easy or difficult to make? Why?

- B. Has anyone tried to make this trip any other way? (Probe for carpool/vanpool, if not mentioned)

- After all have spoken -

- C. (DISCUSS Q.1) Jeff asked you to fill out a form with two questions when you arrived. Did everyone fill theirs out? Let's talk about those questions now.

- What, if anything, would be the benefit of using public transit for the specific trip you make most often?

- Why don't you use public transit for the specific trip you make most often?

- D. Some of you have mentioned using the Gold Line and other Metro Rail lines, has anyone else ever used a Metro Rail Line in Los Angeles County? If yes:

- How long ago?
- Purpose(s) of trips?
- Frequency of use
- Why did you stop using public transit?
- What did you like about using public transit?
- What didn't you like about using public transit?

(7:05-7:20) III. PERCEPTIONS ABOUT METRO

- A. (DISTRIBUTE Q.2) How well is Metro, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, doing in providing public transportation services in Los Angeles County?
- B. (DISCUSS Q.2) Why did you give the grade that you gave?
- C. What, if anything, could Metro do to encourage you to use the transit more often? Would you try transit if Metro sent out promotions such as passes allowing you to ride Metro for free?

(7:20-7:45)IV. GOLD LINE SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS

- E. I think you are all familiar with the Gold Line? Does everyone know what it is and where it runs?
- F. OK. Now, again think about the type of trip you take most often. For most of you this will be a weekday trip to and from work. Think about some of the things about the Gold Line that would have to change for you to take the Gold Line for this trip. It might have something to do with the train, it might have something to do with the station, or it might have something to do with the overall trip. Can anyone give me a change that would get them to take the Gold Line?
- G. (Probe and write down responses. After that, pass out Q.3.) Here's a sheet that lists a number of service attributes in two different categories. Some of them are the same as the reasons you identified, some are not. I'd like you to take a moment to rank how important each item is to you personally within each category. Place the number "1" next to the most important attribute, a number "2" next to the second most important attribute and so forth.
- C. (DISCUSS Q.3) How did you rank the importance of the service attributes in each category? (Probe for reasons and for the service attributes that are not at all important.)

(7:45-8:10)V. Express Service

- C. Some of you indicated that shorter travel times were important to you. What are some of the ways we could shorten the travel times for your trip?
- D. Let me tell you about something we're considering. Right now, we run six trains an hour on the Gold Line during rush hours – 6 AM to 9 AM and 3 PM to 6 PM. So there is a train every 10 minutes -- what we call 10-minute headways. We are thinking of changing two of those trains to express trains. It would make fewer stops and would take about 20% less time from end to end. The stops between Sierra Madre and Union Station will probably be Del Mar, Mission and Highland Park. So for five of the stations, the headways would remain every 10 minutes and offer a faster trip. For the other nine stations, the headways would go to every 15 minutes.
- a. What's your reaction to this plan?
 - b. Would this make you want to try the Gold Line?
 - c. Do you think it would attract more riders?
 - d. (Probe) What do you think of the trade-off between quicker travel times for some stations and longer waits at others?
 - e. What else could we do to get you to ride the Gold Line?

(8:10-8:25)VI.COMMUNICATIONS

- A. If you needed information about riding Metro, where would you start?
- B. How do you currently obtain most of your information about Metro services and its proposed plans?
- C. Is there a better way for Metro to inform you about future bus service changes and improvements?

(8:25-8:30)VII. WRAP-UP/THANK YOU'S

APPENDIX C
(Users Handouts)

Q.1

First Name: _____

Please rank the importance to you of each service attribute within each category. Place the number “1” next to the service attribute that is most important to you, a number “2” next to the second most important service attribute, and so forth until all the items within each category have a rank number.

TRAIN PERFORMANCE

Service Attribute

Rank (1 thru 5)

Shorter travel times

On-time service

Frequent train service

No transfers required

Better bus service to station

TRAIN and STATION IMPROVEMENTS

Service Attribute

Rank(1 thru 5)

Personal space/Lack of crowding on train

Cleanliness of train interiors

Station parking

Real time information at Rail Station about arrival time of next train

Availability of seats for all riders

Q.2

First Name: _____

Please rate the importance of these Rail Station amenities/characteristics. For each service dimension rate its importance to you on a scale of “1” to “5,” where “1” means *not at all important* and “5” means *extremely important*.

Importance

<u>Rail Station Service</u>	<u>Not</u>				<u>Extremely</u>
	<u>At All</u>				
Cleanliness of Rail Station	1	2	3	4	5
Safety/security at Rail Station	1	2	3	4	5
Availability of seating at Rail Stn1	2	3	4	5	
Lighting at Rail Station	1	2	3	4	5
Protection/shelter from weather	1	2	3	4	5
Availability of bike racks/bike lockers at Rail Station	1	2	3	4	5
Train route/schedule information provided at Rail Station	1	2	3	4	5
Availability of ticket machines at Rail Station	1	2	3	4	5
Availability of emergency phone at Rail Station	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX D
(Non-Users Handouts)

Q.1

First Name: _____

What, if anything, would be the benefit of using public transit for the specific trip that you make most often? (Please be specific.)

Why don't you use public transit for the specific trip you make most often? (Please be specific.)

Q.2

First Name: _____

What grade would you give the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for providing public transit services in Los Angeles County?

A

B

C

D

F

Why did you give Metro that grade? (Please be specific.)

Q.3

First Name: _____

Please rank the importance to you of each service attribute within each category. Place the number “1” next to the service attribute that is most important to you, a number “2” next to the second most important service attribute, and so forth until all the items within each category have a rank number.

Group 1

Service Attribute

Rank (1 thru 5)

Shorter travel times _____

On-time service _____

Frequent train service _____

Minimize number of transfers _____

Better bus service to station _____

Group 2

Service Attribute

Rank (1 thru 5)

Personal space/Lack of crowding on train _____

Cleanliness of train interiors _____

Station parking _____

Real time information at Rail Station about
arrival time of next train _____

Availability of seats for all riders _____