

'Right time', 'wrong time'? Passengers want 'on time!'

Following the publication of 'Right Time Performance' data, **Anthony Smith**, chief executive of Passenger Focus, asks whether rail passengers really care about a few minutes here and there?



Anthony Smith
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The recent publication of the so-called 'right time' rail performance statistics and the Industry Strategic Business Plan has reignited debate about the degree to which passengers watch the clock. Passenger Focus research suggests that 'on time' ('right time' is an odd phrase as it implies there is a 'wrong time' as well!) performance really does matter to passengers.

We know from Passenger Focus's rail National Passenger Survey (NPS) that getting trains on time remains the key driver of passenger satisfaction- Figure One shows the link between rises in the Public Performance Measure (PPM) and passenger satisfaction with performance. Figure Two shows a breakdown of the national drivers of satisfaction - this underlines the key importance of performance and is derived from studying the greatest correlation between overall satisfaction and satisfaction with other factors.

This link has remained steady over the last 10 years. How delays are dealt with is the key driver of dissatisfaction - a smaller sample size of course, as more passengers are happy! However, in a way this is good news for the industry as they are flip sides of the same thing - get more trains on time and there are fewer passengers to irritate by how you handle disruption! Passengers are essentially buying the timetable when they buy a ticket - it's the key promise, just like the food in a restaurant. Get that right and everything else flows from it. Get it wrong and passengers will pick up on other things as they are annoyed.

Passengers of course are the keenest judges of performance: they have been on the trains so know all about how timely they were. So why publish data? Well, we know the power of comparative benchmarking from the NPS and this technique works just as well

on performance. This is especially so when industry data can be pretty impenetrable. We have done some joint work with the Office of Rail Regulation on this which shows that passengers want access to relevant performance data - but to be meaningful it needs to reflect their own journey or route rather than a company-wide average.

Passengers won't be looking at this data every day as they broadly expect trains to run on time. However, passengers can see the power of data in driving accountability. Bodies like Passenger Focus can be more effective if we have access to this data and can refer to it in public. Further research work digging deeper on what passengers want from 'on time' data publication, carried out with National Rail Enquiries and the Office of Rail Regulation, will be published soon.

For a long time we were baffled by divergence of NPS and PPM. If PPM is at 90% why is the NPS rating of performance for particular train companies usually about 10% lower? Figure Three shows the difference in PPM and NPS scores for c2c and First Capital Connect. There is a big disconnect. Well, we suspected this was partly to do with the PPM measurement at train destination - how punctual are trains at intermediate stations on the way?

This is a complex discussion which will no doubt form a key part of debate over the spending plans for 2014-19 in the next few months. If you only measure the trains themselves you are missing out on the full passenger experience. A train late or early can

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contain a whole range of passenger experiences - some passengers will consider themselves late, some early, some don't know, some don't care. But you have to ask the passengers as well as measuring what happens to the bits of metal. If you add the two together you start to get a much better idea of what is actually happening on the ground. After all, the basic principle behind astronomy is observing the same phenomena from different angles and then comparing results.

So, we probed further with strong co-operation from the industry - train companies are keen to put more pressure on Network Rail, but the whole industry was very helpful. We did our first bit of work with National Express East Anglia probing experiences coming in and out of Liverpool Street. This involved a pioneering piece of work taking over 7,000 completed NPS questionnaires, which show the train the person was on, the date and then comparing that with the 'on time' (not PPM) punctuality for that train on that date. In that way we built up a truer picture of how passenger satisfaction is affected by punctuality.

Official systems measure punctuality only at a train's destination. In the mornings most passengers get off the train at the same place. So the figures, albeit with PPM's five or 10 minutes' leeway, will probably reflect the majority passenger experience in the morning peak. However, in the evening with passengers getting off all the way along the route, measuring the train only at the end point of its journey is of more limited use. Unless you are one of the few travelling to the very last station, the official punctuality simply does not reflect your experience. It is hard for a passenger to accept that the train was on time when they were late.

From the Liverpool Street analysis it was clear that passengers, particularly commuters, are not very forgiving. We found clear evidence

that passenger satisfaction with performance started to drop from the first minute of delay, rather than from when the train becomes 'officially' late after five or 10 minutes.

We wanted to check this finding with a broader range of train companies. So, the next bit of work was done with Northern and CrossCountry, and finally followed up with East Coast. Taking the results as a whole, this showed that on average passenger satisfaction with punctuality fell by two to three percentage points for every minute after 'on time'. Commuters are the least tolerant, with business and leisure travellers slightly less so. On East Coast among the 9,406 passengers in the analysis, satisfaction with punctuality dropped off at two minutes', five minutes' and eight minutes' delay after 'on time' - all within the 10-minute margin allowed by PPM.

This debate has moved forward fast. We are already seeing data at train-company level, albeit a Moving Annual Average not period by period figures. In an ideal world passengers would probably like to see how their train has performed. So let's see more route level data published this year

We are doing our bit. NPS is already published at route level. We have plans to make it much easier to search our both our NPS data analysis (NPS is weighted to be representative) and the 65,000-plus raw questionnaires we collect each year.

So, overall Passenger Focus thinks that performance is a key passenger concern. Given the monopolistic nature of much rail transport provision and the presence of so much subsidy there is a higher test for openness about performance and data. While passengers won't be looking at data every day, they like the idea of it being published. However, it must be data that is relevant to them - most passengers are only interested in their own journey. Focusing on 'on time' rather than the five/10-minute threshold has a passenger dividend - the closer you are to being 'on time' the happier passengers will probably be. ■

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

All the background research discussed above can be easily accessed via the 'Key Issues/Punctuality and Transparency' section of the Passenger Focus website. Passenger Focus welcomes your views on its argument. Email anthony.smith@passengerfocus.org.uk

FIGURE ONE: NPS PUNCTUALITY AND RELIABILITY VERSUS PPM (NATIONAL)

Source: Passenger Focus

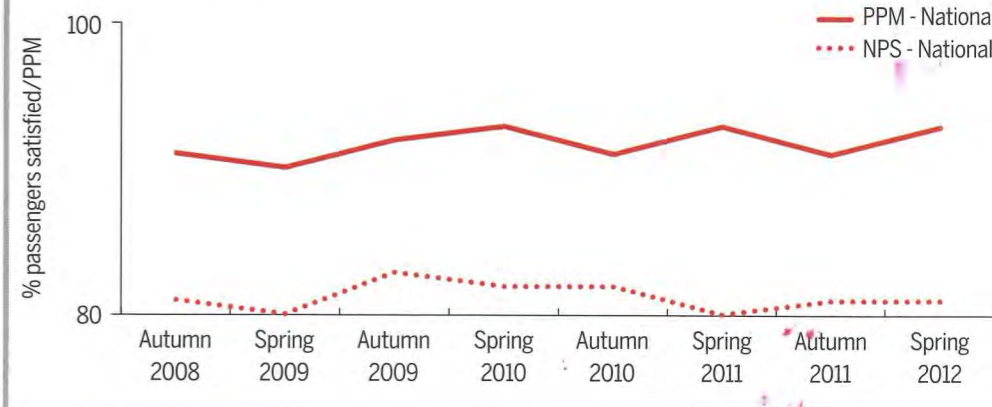


FIGURE TWO: DRIVERS OF OVERALL CUSTOMER SATISFACTION - SPRING 2012/AUTUMN 2011

Source: Passenger Focus

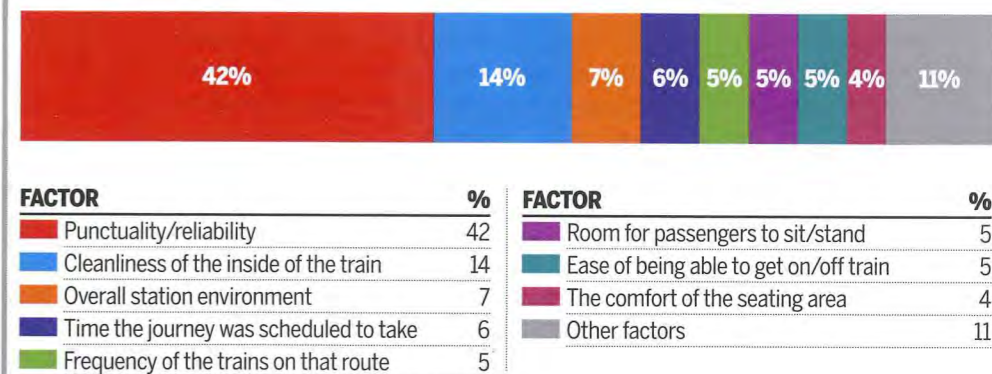


FIGURE THREE: NPS PUNCTUALITY/RELIABILITY VERSUS PPM - C2C AND FIRST CAPITAL CONNECT

Source: Passenger Focus

