

In the passenger seat Anthony Smith



On time? Give us the facts!

Punctuality data: why so pass/fail asks Anthony Smith? Tell us the whole story – we can cope with the truth

Everyone seems to agree that having more, bigger data is the way forward: but to what?

Passenger Focus thinks it forms a basic building block of trust. If the industry gets its data out there, suspicion that something is being hidden can start to be dispelled. Our research shows that passengers have a limited appetite for historic performance data – after all they were on the trains so know how they did! However, passengers want such data available in case they do ever need it and so that bodies like Passenger Focus can hold the industry to account. Passengers also see a role for performance information helping them make choices when buying tickets or deciding which train to catch.

We know from earlier work that passengers have a very keen view on rail performance. Satisfaction drops one percentage point for every minute late on commuter services, with longer-distance passengers having a bit more tolerance. The recent publication of so-called ‘right-time’ performance data is interesting as it shows why satisfaction with performance has always lagged in the rail National Passenger Survey behind the public performance measure figures. The actual passenger experience is very different to the five- and ten-minute PPM bands.

A much more useful picture

So why does the industry present performance data in such an odd way? No passenger would see a train as on time if it arrives four minutes late at its destination. Could we move to a reporting format that showed the spread of performance? This could be a good news story for the industry. Instead of saying, for example, that 48 per cent of trains arrived ‘on time’, tell us what happened to the other 52 per cent as well.

This would lead to a much richer, useful picture. How many trains were one minute late, two minutes late and so on? Passengers would probably relate to and recognise this picture much more clearly. Most trains are on time,

some are a bit late and a few are very late. It gives a sense of the likelihood of delay and just how long the delay might be.

Passenger Focus can see no good reason why right-time data should not be reported for intermediate stops and by individual train. All the data are collected – they are just the facts of how things ran. The rail industry needs to open up and be transparent. Tell us the whole story – we can cope with the truth.

Would this lead to more conservative timetabling, more perverse consequences? Let’s see – but telling passengers the facts about the key thing they are interested in seems a good start.

Passenger Focus is doing its bit on open data. The rail National Passenger Survey and our complaint ‘appeals’ data are now much more readily usable on our website. Our new data tool allows anyone to easily search, create graphics, compare and contrast. We really hope this will make the data more useful as more people in your organisation should find it easier to use and interrogate.

Please go and have a look at www.data.passengerfocus.org.uk/train/complaints/tocs/

Tell us what you think – we will be giving the new tool a bigger push when we publish the results of the Autumn 2013 NPS wave in January 2014. •

Anthony Smith is the chief executive of Passenger Focus

