



Social media: help us to get home

Passengers tell us that when rail services are disrupted they want to be provided with accurate, consistent, timely and useful information that lets them make an informed decision about what they do – and, of course, for services to be back to normal as quickly as possible. Passenger Focus research has found that information during delays are among passengers' top five priorities for improvement, behind value for money, punctuality, frequency and being able to get a seat.

Social media has changed the landscape in which information is provided and received, as passengers become more demanding in terms of speed and accuracy, and less tolerant of what are felt to be stock explanations (some would say excuses) for what has happened.

Many train companies are now using social media, primarily Twitter, to communicate with passengers, particularly when services are disrupted. When used properly it can be a valuable tool for the swift distribution of important information and also for gathering feedback.

In 2012, Passenger Focus carried out research into rail passengers' experiences of and needs from social media. The most significant finding with immediate implications is that passengers said they want train service information of direct, immediate relevance delivered in a professional, not too informal way – and they expect Twitter feeds to be active at all times trains are running.

Perhaps the most significant longer-term implication is that train companies need to think about how passengers can personalise

the information they get. If delivered right, it appears that Twitter can break down traditional perceptions that train companies don't 'do' customer service and can improve the trust passengers have in their train company.

Many rail passengers appear to use and wish to use Twitter as an information channel, rather than as a truly 'social' medium. They regard Twitter, rather than Facebook, as the best social media for train companies to use when communicating with them about disruption. However, they see social media as comple-

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menting, rather than replacing, traditional channels of communication like display boards and announcements, whether on trains or at stations.

One important point to note, and it comes up in a lot of our research, is that many passengers do not know that mechanisms to provide them with useful real-time information already exist. Even among the social-media-savvy passengers recruited for our research, far from everybody was aware their train company provided updates via Twitter. Our conclusion? Train companies need to do more to market the different ways passengers can keep themselves informed about disruption, whether using social media, apps, mobile web pages or other means.

In terms of how Twitter should be used,

individual opinion varied, but a broad view emerged. When it comes to the tone of tweets, train companies should beware of the line between customer and supplier – trying too hard to be the passenger's 'friend' will not suit everyone. Twitter feeds should focus on real-time issues in order to maximise relevance for passengers and non service-related tweets should be used sparingly. Non-standard abbreviations and overly-technical language should be avoided.

Two-way communication with a train company via Twitter is expected in particular circumstances, for example a specific question to which the passenger needs an immediate answer to make a decision about their journey. If a train company responds effectively in these circumstances it can really impress passengers.

However, many people are content simply to be passive recipients of service information.

Two of my colleagues recently visited First Great Western's social media team and watched it in action. @FGW has over 42,000 followers and since its launch it has tweeted more than 75,000 times. The team consists of two people, plus some outsourced support which enables them to monitor their Twitter account between 7am and 10pm. All tweets about FGW that warranted a reply were replied to, with only abusive messages being ignored, although it is interesting to note that some other train companies respond even then, taking the view 'if our customers are really that angry, we must deal with it'.

"Social media clearly has a key role to play in improving communications with passengers"

The FGW social media team uses the internal train information system to try to find out as much information as possible about the issue before replying. On the Tuesday after Easter, when there was disruption to the already-reduced service to London (extensive engineering work was being carried out at Reading), @FGW responded to over 400 tweets. My colleagues felt that passengers would have been pleased with the Twitter service, even if they were frustrated by the disruption itself.

Social media clearly has a key role to play in improving communications with passengers. But our research suggests that no one communications 'channel' will meet everybody's needs. Apps, mobile- and tablet-friendly web pages, announcements and visual displays are all important. And we must not forget the need for well-informed, customer-focused staff. Passengers are human beings and it is clear that, particularly during disruption, many wish to turn to fellow humans for information and advice.



Guy Dangerfield has been with Passenger Focus and its predecessor organisation since 1998. He currently leads the watchdog's work to improve the management of disruption to rail services, reduce the impact of engineering work on rail passengers and research bus passengers' experiences of delays and disruption. Guy is also involved in work on rail fares and ticketing, rail passengers' requirements from the 2014-19 control period and the transparency of train performance information.