

Train operators must build trust, says Passenger Focus

TRAIN companies need to do more to gain the trust of passengers, rather than simply getting the fundamentals of basic service right.

That is the conclusion of a new report, *Passengers' Relationship with the Rail Industry*, from rail passenger watchdog Passenger Focus.

PF's research comes from the *Rail Passenger Trust Survey*, and deals with passenger confidence in the railway as well as trust. It reveals that rail passengers are "broadly as positive towards the rail industry as they are to supermarkets and airlines, and higher than towards banks or energy companies".

A number of operators scored highly on trust, but with one or two exceptions, London and South East rail operators scored worse overall.

Scoring highest in terms of positive trust ratings were Merseyrail (52%), followed by Grand Central (48%), Chiltern Railways (47%), Virgin Trains (46%) and c2c (45%).

Outgoing commuter operator First Capital Connect scored just 22%, while Southeastern and Southern (both 25%), South



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West Trains (26%) and First Great Western (27%) also featured in the bottom five.

"There is much that train companies - and governments - can do to improve trust," said Passenger Focus Chief Executive Anthony Smith.

"It is important for train companies to get the basic service right, ahead of everything else. Then building on closer relationships with their passengers is important.

"One way is through high-quality communication. Passengers should feel that train companies are 'on their side'. We believe these issues should become part of new franchises."

Three different aspects of trust were identified: through service (the day to day and functional aspects of rail services); relationship (how engaged a train company is with its customers, plus emotional factors); and judgement (relating to integrity and reputation).

Comment Barry Doe, RAIL's fares and services expert

I confess I am perplexed by these results, but think the energy market clarifies it.

Rail has a mean satisfaction score of 50%, but energy only 15%. People don't trust the energy suppliers, yet regular interaction is negligible - we decide on a supplier, sign a direct debit and forget it, so from where does 15% come? No doubt it's lack of trust over charges.

Is it the same with rail? People constantly read of high fares, and probably have come to conclusions before they even buy a ticket. Also an £80 purchase from 'Amazon' comes with guarantees and automatic return if dissatisfied, whereas £80 on a rail ticket is an intangible purchase, literally vanishing after use.

It's also hard to compare, for example, London Overground with the vast complexity and service-variety of First Great Western. Expectations differ entirely, so I'm not sure it's really valid to try to compare across the whole system.

I travel on most operators, all times of day, and for sure ScotRail, South West Trains and FGW would be the top three for consistent quality of the large players. Yet they come seventh, 18th and 17th respectively out of the 21 in the tables.



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PF found that while some train companies had developed good relationships with their passengers - communicating directly and proactively with passengers, for example - there were "particular problem areas" with confusion

over ticketing options and during disruption. PF says that transparency can also inspire trust.

However, PF also found that train companies did well on judgement - they were seen to have high principles, a good reputation and the ability to show leadership - although judgement did not contribute as much to trust as service and relationship.

The executive summary of the report concludes that consumer trust is "accepted as important since it can bring loyalty and repeat purchase", and that: "While commuters have little choice in terms of operator, a more positive relationship can help to move rail travel from being a 'distress purchase' and towards a more conventional customer/supplier relationship".

The report's authors said: "We see this with leisure travellers actively seeking out the latest email offers from 'their' TOC, and in the relationship passengers have with both Virgin Trains and the open access operators. This benefit may become more apparent when franchises are due for renewal."

But what are termed 'hygiene factors' need to be addressed first. As "dissatisfiers", issues such as ease of journey, total door-to-door travel time through speed, safety and reliability were essential to gaining higher scores in relationship measures, by covering passengers' emotional needs.

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Level of trust in individual TOCs

