



Satisfaction on the rise

Anthony Smith is happy about some very customer friendly ticketing developments at East Coast and then moves on to ask if it's scary after dark

We have all done it. You are booking online and you press the button too quickly. You get the dates wrong. You get the time wrong. That sinking feeling normally means you have lost the money if you are booking Advance tickets.

East Coast, which has clearly been investing recently in its ticketing kit, has done something really passenger friendly.

It has introduced a one-hour 'no quibble' guarantee when booking online. This means that if passengers make a mistake booking online and then phone web support within an hour, East Coast will change the booking without making a charge. Passengers are able to change any aspect of the booking.

There is more! Passengers collecting tickets from ticket-vending machines will be able to use any card with their name on – not just the card used to book the ticket. Great for parents or businesses. Plus, East Coast is also looking at allowing passengers to book tickets and ask for them to be sent to a third-party address, for example parents booking tickets for sons and daughters at university. All things that many industries might consider standard but this is a great leap forward.

Added to East Coast's other innovation that allows e-tickets to be changed once booked, this means that the chances of innocent passengers being found without 'valid' tickets, but having no intent to defraud the railway, are lessened. Given the consequences that can follow this – hefty fines and, astonishingly, even criminal prosecution – these changes are a good thing that other train companies should note.

Post-8pm satisfaction gap narrowing

Meanwhile what is happening after dark? Do passenger satisfaction scores plummet? Back in 2008 we did a boost to the National Passenger Survey, looking at passengers travelling between eight and 10 in the evening during March – so it was dark. Interesting results. Things are getting better – the gap in satisfaction after 8pm that we have seen before is narrowing. Overall the satisfaction on the later journeys has risen from 66 per cent in 2008 to 88 per cent in 2013. While satisfaction overall has risen this is still a good trend.

There are still many aspects which rate higher before 8pm, including car parking, connections, and staff on board. A few factors are rated higher after 8pm – space on board and station facilities (maybe passengers were surprised to find them open?).

The role of human presence at stations is interesting in this. Passengers rating personal security as 'very good' or 'fairly good' has risen both before and after 8pm – rising from 61 per cent and 49 per cent for before and after 8pm in 2008 to 77 per cent and 74 per cent now. Women give higher scores than men. Again, encouraging.

What lies behind this? A combination of things probably; rising passenger numbers mean more people around more of the time, improved lighting and upkeep of many stations, more CCTV, falling crime rates generally and, one hopes, more visible staff and police. Let's really hope this trend has continued next time we ask passengers what they think.

Anthony Smith is chief executive of Passenger Focus

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