THE LAST WORD

Customer service innovation

Recently RTM's Sleeper blog asked how innovation could help improve customer service within the rail industry. **Anthony Smith**, Passenger Focus chief executive, gives us his view.

Rail is a boom industry; more and more people are choosing to travel by train. Our National Passenger Survey highlights that, while overall satisfaction scores are generally good, less than half of passengers think they get good value for money and even less (44%) are satisfied with how the train company deals with delays.

How could innovation improve customer service? It's not just about technology – traditional face-to-face customer service is still a key way to impress a customer or passenger. How could train companies make innovations in this area? Perhaps by freeing up staff time to improve their interaction with the passengers they serve?

An online feedback portal that invites passengers to comment on the customer service that they have experienced could be a great way of rewarding and incentivising staff who go the extra mile to make a difference.

A theme that occurs time and again when we talk to passengers is information: information on fares, on journey options and importantly on what to do during disruption. Using innovation to boost the flow of information to passengers could be the cheapest way to really improve satisfaction levels. Here we have considered some key areas where a bit of innovative thinking would really pay off.

Service information

Passengers have told us that they want their operator's Twitter feed to be a constant flow of real-time information and a means to get instant answers. As new technologies develop, how will passengers want these to be used to get information to them?

There is an ongoing debate around the use of announcements on board trains. Some find them annoying, especially when repeating obvious information such as the train being non-smoking.

Some operators have tried out information screens, or other methods of getting information across – though care needs to be taken to ensure that people with hearing or visual impairments aren't at a disadvantage here.

Fares information

Buying the right ticket can be difficult, and passengers tell us they often feel 'ripped off'.

The Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) recently released the database of all available fares, which was a step in the right direction. Some innovative thinking about how to make this into a useful tool for passengers could really make a difference.

Value for money is not just about the price of tickets. Many passengers continue to feel that the fares structure is too complicated, confusing and illogical. The chief complaint is often one of the 'obstacle course' of restrictions attached to tickets.

As smart technology develops, the industry needs to consider how it will communicate the restrictions attached to each ticket so that passengers are aware of exactly what it is that they are buying.

Crowding information

Not being able to get a seat can really annoy passengers. Nationally, just over two-thirds (69%) are content with the room available to sit/stand – this drops to 60% for commuters.

In the long term, investment in new trains and new infrastructure is crucial. But improvements like this can take years to appear. In the meantime, operators could look at ways to let passengers know which are the busiest trains, and suggest alternatives – less busy services.

In the Netherlands a mobile app is being developed to give live information on how busy a single train is. Giving passengers the power to avoid the busy trains could really improve their overall experience.

En-route facilities information

Another app being trialled can tell the user where facilities are on the train, such as the disabled access, before it arrives. Rather than having long announcements with the location of the coffee shop and a list of its products, why not have an app where you can pre-order your coffee so you don't have to queue?

Anthony Smith