

In the passenger seat

Trust me I'm a Toc



Anthony Smith says that understanding trust more, and what drives it, may become increasingly important in franchise replacement or extensions

Trust. The most basic and probably most underestimated component of our lives. You can't bottle it, you can't regulate it and you can't specify it in franchises. It can take years to build up trust in a brand and seconds to lose it.

Brands and the railway are interesting. In our research the only brand that comes across with any resonance among passengers is Virgin – the recent West Coast affair probably

reinforced this as it gave the brand much more exposure. However, most passengers seem to have a hazy idea about other brands – not surprising given you can still find British Rail signs on the Underground! Brand loyalty is also predicated on choice. Many rail passengers do not feel they have, or do not actually have, much choice. Driving brand values in a monopoly situation is difficult.



Does it matter? It should matter at times of franchise replacement surely. The recent publication of Passenger Focus's rail National Passenger Survey (NPS) and *Which?* magazine's rail brand survey was interesting. Why were the scores seemingly so different? For example 81 per cent of passengers in the NPS were satisfied overall with their last

journey with FCC. However, *Which?* gave 40 per cent overall customer satisfaction. Why the gap?

The two surveys measure different things in very different ways. The 65,000 plus passengers who take part in the NPS are recording their satisfaction with different aspects of the journey they are making or have just made. The sample is representative of current rail users including business users. The survey is designed to produce information that can drive change and action. We know from the various independent reviews we have had done that the survey is pretty accurate – to within one or two per cent.

The *Which?* survey is drawn from a self-selected poll of its members who have used the railway in the last year. The data from the 7,500 participants is weighted afterwards using NPS data. It measures overall satisfaction and likelihood to recommend the company. It is not possible to divine from the data what caused the person to think that or what the train company might do to improve.

It is very common for people to have quite different opinions about how they are dealt with individually and about a brand or industry overall. Banking, energy and the health service probably fall into this category. However, the two rail surveys generally put the train companies in the same relative positions.

So does it matter if you trust a train company or not? Yes, it must do.

Talking to people in the industry there seems to be a general feeling that fare rises, patchy performance and media coverage drive negative overall perceptions despite individual experiences.

We know from our own journeys – as reflected in the NPS – they are OK most of the time.

Understanding trust more, and what drives it, may become increasingly important in franchise replacement or extensions.

We are already doing more work to understand this and hope to pilot some new work with train companies. ■

Anthony Smith is the chief executive of Passenger Focus