

Disruption: the moment of truth



When things go wrong it often feels to passengers like Dunkirk, rather than D Day, says **Anthony Smith**

With punctuality, the key driver of passenger satisfaction, the rail industry starts on the back foot. We have all been there. You are waiting for the 14:30 train which is showing on the information boards as 'on time'. There is only one problem. It is 14:32 and there is no sign of the train. 'Legacy' signalling and information systems undermine a key element of trust: good information. New systems are on their way which will help.

Also there appears to be common consent in the industry that the timetable is undeliverable. At least three per cent of PPM is lost simply through the timetable. Allowances for time at stations simply do not reflect reality. It just won't work. Every time the signallers are left to work out the problems. Network Rail is thinking about how it might unpick timetable planning rules and then rebuild the timetable. Better data from new signalling systems' GPS tracking of trains will help us understand which bits of the timetable aren't working. However, history suggests this could take some time.

So when things go wrong it often does feel to passengers like Dunkirk, rather than D Day. This frustration is not just an anecdote. It is backed up by our recent research into passengers' experience of delays and disruption to their journeys. Other words that described their feelings included irritated, powerless, resigned.

The industry has put considerable effort into improving information in recent years. Despite this, only 34 per cent of those questioned were very or fairly well satisfied with the way their train company had dealt with the delay.

Perhaps one of the strongest messages to come from this research is that passengers who are given a reason for their delay are significantly more likely to say the disruption was handled well overall, than those who are given no reason (54 per cent if reason given, 19 per cent if no reason given). We know from other research that the way the industry deals with delays is a major driver of dissatisfaction. Poor, inaccurate or contradictory information can hinder passengers' trust in their rail company. And those automatic apology messages don't go down well either.

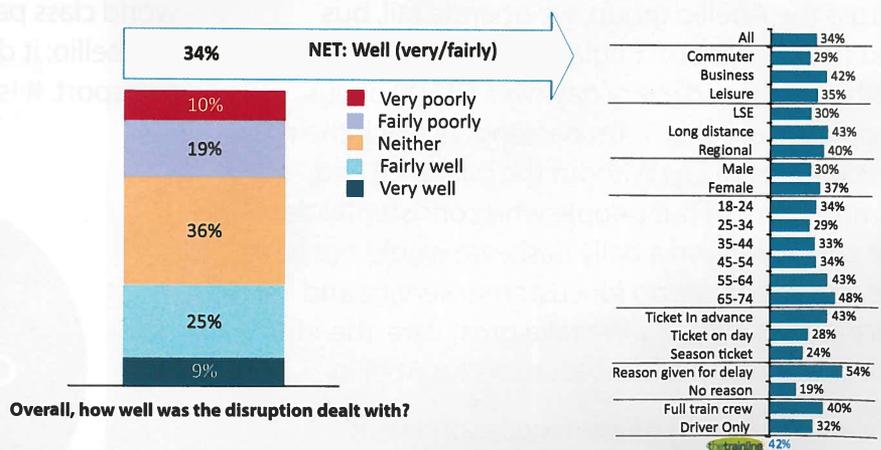
So what are the pointers for improvement?

First, passengers need to feel that the

train companies are actually on their side, that they feel some empathy with their position. Thinking how best to communicate with passengers and being available to answer their questions. This may not always be easy when unexpected delays occur. But tone and honesty, and describing the situation in a way that paints a meaningful picture, can be the best way forward. Staff – whether on trains or at stations – need to be able to provide the most up-to-date information to passengers. They need to be able to keep pace with the speed of modern communications and ideally ahead of the passengers. Southeastern, for example, has told me it is going to provide tablets to many of its staff to do just that.

About a third of delayed passengers felt the train company handled the disruption well

Overall how well the disruption was dealt with: All disrupted passengers



P Q18 Overall, how well do you think the train company dealt with the disruption on this last occasion?
Base: All respondents who have experienced delay in the past week n=1020