

In the passenger seat Anthony Smith



Promises, promises... building trust in franchising

The Department for Transport now requires any new franchisee to issue a Customer Report, but merely producing a report doesn't change attitudes - the acid test will be how those promises are delivered, says **Anthony Smith**

It seems cloak and dagger; we don't know when it takes place, who the players are, what they offer, if they deliver what they promise - it's not transparent at all,' said one Colchester commuter involved in our recent franchise research.

Passengers feel alienated from the franchise-replacement process - sometimes the first thing passengers know about a

new operator is when their train rolls in one morning with a new sticker on the side. Not a great start to a relationship where trust is going to be important. We know from our previous work on *Passenger Power!* that rail passengers want more information about what winning bidders have promised, alongside a real opportunity to influence what goes into the contract.



Another passenger expressed this view: 'We buy tickets so we are investing in the service.... [we] should be seen as shareholders not users.'

The Department for Transport (DfT) now requires any new franchisee to issue a Customer Report setting out its plans for the railway and its commitments to passengers. We've just published a new piece of research summarising the findings of more than 20 focus groups among passengers using c2c, Abellio Greater Anglia and Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR). *What passengers want from Customer Reports* explores passenger reactions to the first reports to be published, highlighting best practice and areas for improvement.

Overall, passengers approve of the notion of the report and regard it as positive that new franchisees are required to issue one. They appreciate the transparency of the operator communicating directly with them and telling them openly about their future plans for the network. However, whether people trust in what the report promises depends on their previous experiences with that operator. Merely producing a report doesn't change attitudes - the acid test will be how those promises are delivered.

Be honest

The c2c passengers we spoke to had a broadly positive attitude towards their operator and were more likely to trust the promises set out. GTR passengers had a more negative attitude and so tended to be sceptical and less likely to believe that the promises could be delivered. Key to enhancing credibility is to be honest, even if it's bad news. Passengers want to know if targets haven't been met and why not, or if fares are going to rise.

Commitments should be laid out clearly with a timetable for when improvements are set to come into effect. Targets need to be given context with comparable data, such as previous years' results and other operators' scores. The report must address the issues that are of key concern to passengers. Personalised information is important - people want to hear about their own station or journey.

In terms of content and presentation, clarity and openness are key. Language needs to be clear, without railway jargon. The tone should be non-patronising and straightforward. However, most of the people we spoke to said they wouldn't have picked the report up and read it. There's a challenge for the industry in how to package and promote the report to get more people reading it.

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Now we're talking to the DfT about this to try and influence future franchise specification. We're also asking operators to take note of this feedback from passengers and learn from it when developing their own reports. These first iterations have been well received but passengers are telling us that improvements can be made.

View the research at www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/what-passengers-want-from-customer-reports

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