

How can train operators gain passengers' trust?

Passengers know little about who runs their trains, but more openness about why franchises have been awarded, and what has been promised, might be the foundation of a better relationship



Trust is the key ingredient of human relationships. But you cannot legislate for it, franchise it, build it into contracts or buy it. You have to earn it. It takes years to build up, but can be lost in minutes. So what role does trust play in public transport?

The recent *Which?* survey on rail services made us think. It was asking about different things in a different way from the rail National Passenger Survey that Passenger Focus undertakes. But scores differing by 40%, even if the relative positions of the train companies were similar, are difficult to explain. Could it be that passengers hold in their heads two thoughts at once? My journey today was okay (as measured in our survey) – but I do not really trust the train company or rail industry (as measured by *Which?*)?

Does it matter? Yes, if rail wants to continue to command public support.

How can the transport industry build trust? Passenger Focus has just published research into how passengers want to be engaged by the rail industry. A report on bus passengers will follow.

Passengers, we found, know little about the railways. They do not need to be troubled by who is running what. However, the recent problems with the West Coast franchise and the attendant front page news have clearly sensitised passengers to the franchising process. The impression left is that the highest bidder wins and quality comes second.

Our research showed that passengers are mystified about how one day their train has a different company name on the side. They have no idea a franchise replacement is under way and are then frustrated that their views have not been sought. So a

good first step is to make better efforts to reach the ordinary passenger, tell them a franchise replacement is going on and find out what they think.

Trust is difficult to achieve in public transport. Many passengers do not feel they have a choice about whether to travel or who to travel with (even if they choose where to live). Yet there is little concern among passengers as to who is running their trains. While individual train companies might have some awareness with their passengers the only brand that resonates is Virgin's.

Once a new franchise is awarded, the industry should clearly set out in one place what has been secured for passengers and what else is going to happen on the line. Say why the winning company has been picked.

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Bring all this together and you might start to be able to build a convincing narrative.

As a franchise starts to run, make it clear how the company is doing. Give passengers a chance to have their say. Make it clear that the passenger voice is being listened to. Passenger Focus thinks this can be partly done by building in targets based on a boosted National Passenger Survey.

There is no better way to build trust than to keep your promises day in, day out. Performance continues to be the main factor underlying passenger satisfaction, and performing consistently is crucial.

Train companies carry a mixture of passengers, which makes pleasing all of them difficult. As the National Passenger

Survey shows, pleasing commuters is very difficult. They are on their way to work, they have an intense experience of the service, the fares go up every year and it all feels like a tax. After working in this area for 14 years, I am convinced that train companies should aspire to indifference among their commuter passengers.

Leisure passengers can be pleased, as the NPS shows – long-distance, older, female leisure passengers with advance tickets clock the highest value-for-money scores.

The drive towards open data is welcome. On-time performance data is a good example of this. For years we have known that passenger satisfaction is lower than the public performance measure (which measures trains arriving within five or 10 minutes of schedule at the final destination). This is no surprising – a train could be late at many intermediate stops, but on time at the end. So opening up the data has simply brought it into line with the actual passenger experience.

Fares. The government announces a rise based on the retail price index plus one per cent for regulated fares. However, my fare goes up much more to compensate for one which goes up much less. Giving passengers much more information before they buy and telling them when they can use what they are about to buy, before they have bought it, is crucial. "See restrictions" must become a thing of the past.

If the Government and the industry are to ever get more credit for the investment and improvements they are making on the railways they need to build trust and confidence. Engagement, delivery and transparency are the keys to this.

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