

Bus users won't put up with being left in the dark

New research shows passengers are often left feeling powerless and stranded when buses don't turn up. Passenger Focus will be pressing for companies to provide information, not irritation



It was a cold snowy morning in February. Clare was standing at the stop, waiting for her bus into Manchester. It did not appear. There was no number to ring, no app to summon up and no other way of getting information. The result: intense frustration – and, as a result of this, Clare now uses another bus company.

This is a very odd way for a company to treat a customer. You are not going to provide the service you promised, but you have no way of reaching your customers who rely on you: not a situation designed to engender trust or loyalty.

Peering up the road wondering where the bus has got to is a common passenger experience. Passenger Focus research shows, unsurprisingly, that punctuality is bus passengers' top priority for improvement. The new Bus Passenger Survey shows satisfaction with punctuality ranges in different parts of England from 57% to 83%. As with the railways, getting there on time is the key thing passengers are buying.

Finding reliable, accessible information about how your bus is running is not always easy. We have carried out new research into bus passengers' experiences of delays and service disruption and how it affects them, as well as looking at how to alleviate the problems.

The comments from passengers are powerful: "You just get your information from whoever's stood there at the bus stop"; "National Rail has live departures which is really useful – why can't the buses do the same?"; "Being communicated with during disruption makes the passenger feel actually, you are important... it's customer service, it's politeness; it puts everybody in a better mood."

The key findings are: first, passengers understand that buses will inevitably be affected by traffic congestion, roadworks and accidents in the same way

as other vehicles on the public highway. They accept it, to a degree, as part and parcel of bus travel. Nevertheless, passengers feel that bus companies could do more to reduce delays by focusing on those elements perceived to be within their control.

Second, the consequences for passengers of bus delays are varied, including being late for work, late picking up children, or late for medical and other appointments. As well as practical issues, passengers talked about anxiety, stress and sometimes additional expense (for example, if a missed connection meant buying a new ticket for a different bus company or taking a taxi).

The research gives a strong sense that bus passengers feel powerless when faced with delays. There is, many feel, no means of finding out what is go-

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ing on. As one passenger put it: "It's mental torture sometimes at bus stops working out whether to stay or whether to go".

Improvements in two principal areas would help bus passengers when delays and disruption occur: better information and a more customer-focused attitude from bus drivers.

Providing information to make an informed decision in these circumstances will make a significant difference, and passengers have a clear preference for real-time departure displays at bus stops. The introduction of apps and Twitter feeds that provide real-time running information is important, but it will not suit or reach all passengers. Also, the providers of real-time information systems need to strive for higher levels of accuracy.

Regarding driver attitude, the research shows a significant gap between passengers' experiences and their desire that during delays and disruption drivers behave as the bus company's customer service representative, providing information and expressing regret. Closing this gap by fostering a strong customer service ethos among driving staff is vital. At the same time companies should explore how to reduce the burden on drivers by communicating directly with passengers already on board. Passengers can often hear the cab radio crackling away but this information is rarely passed on. Could a TV-style display provide the information needed?

Passenger Focus makes a number of recommendations in the light of the research, including that the Government should have an objective to put in place the "back of house" infrastructure to allow real-time bus departure information to be provided throughout the country. And there should be a long-term objective to install a physical display at as many stops as possible. This is ambitious in the light of current funding pressure, but it is the right long-term aim.

We will work with the bus industry, transport authorities and the Government to ensure that the issues highlighted in this research are understood and discussion starts on how to move forward.

In separate work, we will report later this year on measures to attack the problem from the opposite end – by improving punctuality of bus services in the first place.

Bus Passengers' Experience of Delays and Disruption is available to download at www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/bus-passenger-survey

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