



## Mystery shop of rail ticket retailing

Internet checks

March 2007

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

Passenger Focus undertook a mystery shopping programme to review the performance of a number of websites that sell rail tickets and offer information to passengers. The sites reviewed are as follows:

- National Rail Enquiries Website ([www.nationalrail.co.uk](http://www.nationalrail.co.uk))
- Selected train company websites
- Trainline website ([www.thetrainline.com](http://www.thetrainline.com))

### 1.2. Methodology

All mystery shopping was carried out between mid-October and mid-November 2006. In total two members of staff from Passenger Focus worked on the project and undertook a total 150 internet checks. The checks were of train company websites (three checks per route based on three scenarios: 42 checks in total – on train company websites that offered ticket booking facilities), the National Rail Enquiries and the Trainline websites (three checks on each train company route: 108 checks in total). The three scenarios for each train company route were:

1. Two adults, two children – no railcard. Asking for cheapest option. Travelling early morning (7-9am) on 27/11 and travelling back early afternoon 29/11 (12-3pm)
2. One Adult – Disabled Persons railcard. Travelling late morning –noon (10-12am) on 28/11 and travelling back early afternoon (12 – 3pm) 30/11
3. Two Adults – Travelling First Class: if first class is not available, travelling standard class. Travelling during morning Peak on 29/11 (7-9 am) and travelling back evening peak (4-7pm) 29/11.

## 2. MAIN FINDINGS

### 2.1 Time to process information

We measured how long it took the train company, National Rail Enquiries and the Trainline websites to provide details, including the times of trains that met the shoppers' needs.

As illustrated in table one below, the majority of timetable information was processed within 0-5 seconds across the train company websites.

TransPennine Express, c2c and First Great Western were the only websites not to process the timetable information within 0-5 seconds for any of their three scenarios.

Table 1: time to process timetable information (train company websites)

<b>Train Company</b>	<b>0-5secs</b>	<b>6-10secs</b>	<b>11-15secs</b>	<b>16-20secs</b>	<b>&gt; 20secs</b>
Arriva Trains Wales	2	1			
c2c		1	2		
Central Trains	2	1			
Chiltern Trains	1	2			
First Capital Connect	2		1		
First Great Western		3			
First ScotRail	2	1			
TransPennine Express		3			
GNER	2	1			
Midland Mainline	2				1
"one"	2			1	
Silverlink Train Services	2	1			
South West Trains	1	2			
Virgin Trains	3				
<b>Total</b>	<b>21 (50%)</b>	<b>16 (38%)</b>	<b>3 (7%)</b>	<b>1 (2%)</b>	<b>1 (2%)</b>

Hull Trains, Northern, Southern and Southeastern do not offer this service on their websites.

Tables two and three show the response time for both the National Rail Enquiries and the Trainline sites respectively. In tandem with the train company results, the majority of information was processed within 0-5 seconds.

Table 2: time to process timetable information (National Rail Enquiries website)

0-5secs	6-10secs	11-15secs	16-20secs	> 20secs
42 (78%)	11 (20%)			1 (2%)

Table 3: time to process timetable information (Trainline website)

0-5secs	6-10secs	11-15secs	16-20secs	> 20secs
31 (57%)	20 (37%)	3 (6%)		

The National Rail Enquiries website was the most successful at this however. Just over three-quarters of its checks were processed within 0-5 seconds, making it considerably faster than both the train companies and Trainline websites for accessing timetable information.

## **2.2 Parity between prices**

Three scenarios for each route were inputted into the train company, National Rail Enquiries and the Trainline websites.

We then checked the prices for the cheapest return fare across the three different websites to ascertain the degree on parity of price. We also did the same for the cheapest combination of single tickets (where available).

Of the 17 routes checked, only one showed a difference in price. This was for the London to Peterborough route. The GNER website was offering its single advance tickets at a discount compared to the prices indicated on the National Rail Enquiries and the Trainline websites.

For the three journey scenarios we checked on this route, GNER's advance tickets were cheaper to purchase on its website on two of the three occasions.

For example (scenario one), GNER offered a price of £67.60, whilst the other two websites (NRE and the Trainline) offered £76.60. This was for the same tickets. For scenario three, GNER offered the tickets at £73, whilst the other two websites offered a price of £82. This was for the same tickets.

### 2.3 Insurance

All train company websites that sell tickets (except Chiltern who don't sell insurance) and the Trainline offer the option of insurance when booking your tickets. Both the Trainline and the train company websites offered insurance at £1 each way.

However, there was one difference between the train company and the Trainline websites. All the train company websites have insurance as an opt-in feature: you have to select the boxes to buy the insurance. With the Trainline however, you have to opt-out of the insurance (the boxes already have ticks against them).

### 2.4 Price of delivery

There is a great deal of parity between the train companies and the Trainline websites in how they can deliver your tickets and how much it will cost.

There is one exception, as highlighted by table four. Next day delivery of your tickets from the majority of train companies' websites that we looked at will be £5 (South West Trains and First ScotRail charged £6). However, on the Trainline site, this will cost you £6.

Table 4: methods and costs of ticket delivery

Method of delivery	Train companies	the Trainline (plus South West Trains and First ScotRail)
First Class	£0	£0
Fast Ticket	£0	£0
Next Day Delivery	£5	£6
Same Day (London Only)	£10-15	£10-15

## 2.5 Price of transaction

The Trainline charged you £2 for using a credit card (it went up from £1.50 halfway through the shops on 31/10/06). None of the train company websites that we looked at were found to practice this.

## 2.6 National Rail Enquiries website – links to other websites

It is not possible to purchase tickets on the National Rail Enquiries website. Timetable and fare information for a journey can be checked and passengers are then directed to a vendors list that gives the option to choose which website to purchase tickets from.

First Capital Connect and South West Trains both sell tickets yet were not listed as vendors by national rail (since the work First Capital Connect has now been added as a listed vendor).

The National Rail Enquiries website also did not transfer journey details inputted onto its website across to the chosen vendors website.

## 2.7 Availability of advance purchase tickets

For a period of three weeks, the availability of advance purchase tickets were monitored for 12 routes up until the day before travel.

Table five summarises the costs of the advance tickets up until the day of travel if they were available. We tested the availability of value advance tickets for travel two hours either side of noon for a journey on the 11<sup>th</sup> November (outbound) and 13<sup>th</sup> November (return).

Table 5: availability and cost of value advance tickets

Train Company	Route	Cost of Saver Return	Price of Value Advance tickets 3 weeks before departure date	Price of Value Advance tickets one day before travel
"one"	Norwich – London	£36.40	£10	£10
	London – Ipswich	£27.50	£10	£10
Virgin Trains	London – Glasgow	£94.10	£44	Goes above Saver Return at four days before travel: £96

	Liverpool – London	£57.20	£31	£31.50
	London – Manchester	£57.10	£25	£30.50
First	London – Cardiff	£54	£22	£32
Great Western	Plymouth – London	£64	£32	£44.50
Midland	Sheffield – London	£53	£14	£26
Mainline	London – Derby	£45.70	£12	£18
GNER	London – Leeds	£71.60	25.45 (GNER website): £32 (National Rail Enquiries & Trainline)	£40 (GNER website): £45 (National Rail Enquiries & Trainline)
	Newcastle – London	£91.40	£34 (GNER website): £38.50 (National Rail Enquiries & Trainline)	Goes above Saver Return at two days before travel: £93.65; GNER Website
	London - Edinburgh	£94.10	£47	Goes above Saver Return at T-2 days: £107.15

On 9 out of the 12 routes it was possible to purchase value advance tickets a day before departure. These tickets would have been cheaper than purchasing a Saver Return ticket. On two out of the three GNER routes along with Virgin Trains' London to Glasgow route, this was not the case.

On three of the routes (London – Ipswich, Liverpool to London and London to Manchester) prices for the quota tickets fluctuated during the three-week period. It did not necessarily follow that prices became more expensive the closer one approached the day before travel day.

GNER provided a selection of its advance value tickets at a cheaper price than the corresponding tickets listed at the National Rail Enquiries and Trainline websites.

## Passenger Focus

March 2007



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