



Telesales Mystery Shopping Report

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**Telesales
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Passenger Focus commissioned Continental Research to carry out a mystery shopping programme to measure the performance of the following aspects of the rail service:

- ticket machines
- ticket offices
- on train provision of tickets
- telesales

The results of the telesales services are provided in this report. The findings for the other services are provided under separate cover.

1.2. Methodology

All mystery shopping for telesales was carried out between mid-October and mid-November 2006. Passenger Focus chose five train telesales operations to monitor. This choice included a number of long distance operators and South West Trains, which was chosen at random: First Great Western, GNER, TransPennine Express, South West Trains and Virgin Trains. Fifty calls were made to each telesales centre and on each occasion the caller requested a price for a specific journey scenario. The number of scenarios varied by train company and the one to be tested was generated at random from the set of journey scenarios put together for that train company.

All calls were made from the Continental Research computer aided telephone interviewing (CATI) system; this enabled the number of call attempts to be monitored as well as the length of time to get connected to an operator. A full copy of the data tabulations has been provided to Passenger Focus under separate cover.

It should be noted that some of the sub-samples reported are too small to report actual percentages. For this reason numbers are used instead as these are more reliable and indicate that statistical caution should be observed.

2. MAIN FINDINGS

2.1. Number of calls

In virtually all cases, operators only had to make one call to the telesales centre (i.e. they did not often get an engaged tone). Out of the 250 calls, on only two occasions did the operator have to redial. On one occasion when calling GNER, the operator had to make five calls before getting through and on one occasion when calling Virgin Trains, the operator got through on the second occasion.

2.2. Waiting time

Waiting time (defined as the time from first call to getting through to an operator) varied from hardly any time to over 20 minutes. The average waiting time by train company was as follows:

[Table 1: average waiting time](#)

Train Company	First Great Western	GNER	South West Trains	TransPennine Express	Virgin Trains
Time (minutes)	8.1	9.9	8.4	4.8	8.3

Three of the train companies averaged around 8 minutes, but TransPennine Express was significantly shorter at 4.8 minutes and GNER a little longer at 10 minutes.

The full distribution (number of shoppers waiting in each of the time bands shown) is:

Table 2: waiting time

Waiting Time	First Great Western	GNER	South West Trains	TransPennine Express	Virgin Trains
(Base)	50	50	50	50	50
Up to 1 min	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	10% (5)	6% (3)
Over 1, up to 3 mins	6% (3)	8% (4)	10% (5)	22% (11)	0% (0)
Over 3, up to 5 mins	14% (7)	10% (5)	18% (9)	26% (13)	18% (9)
Over 5, up to 10 mins	58% (29)	42% (21)	40% (20)	32% (16)	48% (24)
Over 10, up to 20 mins	20% (10)	36% (18)	30% (15)	10% (5)	22% (11)
Over 20 mins	2% (1)	4% (2)	2% (1)	0% (0)	6% (3)

2.3. Accuracy of the prices quoted

Operators read out a journey scenario and asked for the price of the tickets. These prices were then fed back to Passenger Focus and it was determined whether the price quoted was correct. The train companies were generally good at quoting the correct price, however as table 3 shows, there were some problems:

Table 3: number of incorrect quotes/no information

	First Great Western	GNER	TransPennine Express	South West Trains	Virgin Trains
Incorrect prices (out of 50)	5	5	1	1	3
Would not quote price (including where hung up)	2	0	7	4	3

First Great Western and GNER quoted incorrect prices for five of the fifty journeys and TransPennine Express would not quote a price on seven of the fifty journeys. These were mostly for scenarios that involved either several trips per week on the same route or for several trips in a more complex journey. The number of trips relating to missing or incorrect prices for the various scenarios were:

Table 4: incorrect quotes (main categories)

	First Great Western	GNER	TransPennine Express	South West Trains	Virgin Trains
Multiple trips on same route	4	2	2	1	1
Complex multiple trips	2	3	3	3	2
Others	1	1	3	1	3

Multiple trips on the same route

For the multiple trips on the same route, the caller asked the telesales centre to quote for a price where the individual would be making three return trips, during the week, between the same destinations. The telesales centre should have quoted either a weekly season ticket price, or the weekly All-Line Rover (depending on what was cheaper).

For example, one of GNER's scenarios was as follows:

"I am making three journeys from London to Newcastle Upon-Tyne next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM coming back 5PM) going and coming back. What is the best ticket(s) for me to get?"

Apart from being offered (if available) a combination of cheap advance tickets, we should have been offered the All-Line Rover at a cost of £375. We were offered prices of £571.50 on one occasion and £408 on another.

In the case of First Great Western, we found on four occasions that where we should have been quoted for a weekly season ticket, we were in fact offered tickets for each journey. For example:

“I am making three journeys from London to Swindon next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM, coming back 5PM) going and coming back, what is the best ticket(s) for me to get?”

The weekly season, at £147.80 should have been offered. Nevertheless, quotes of £255, £190.50, £195, and £255 were given.

“Complex” multiple trips

The “complex” scenarios were somewhat similar to the multiple scenarios above, however in this case there would be a multitude of different journeys along the same route. For example, on Virgin Trains we asked:

“Next week, I am making four journeys, they are: Monday London to Manchester going in AM peak (8AM), coming back PM peak (5PM), Wednesday London to Liverpool, Thursday London to Stafford and on Friday London to Birmingham New Street. What is the best price I can get? All the journeys are in peak times.”

The most one should have had to pay for this trip would again be £375 (All-Line Rover). We were instead quoted £638 – an over charge of £263.

For GNER, we asked:

“Next week, I am making four journeys, they are: Monday London to Newcastle going in AM peak (8AM), coming back PM peak (5PM), Wednesday London to Liverpool, Thursday London to Stafford and on Friday London to Birmingham New Street. What is the best price I can get? All the journeys are at peak times.”

The most one should have had to pay for this combination of trips would again be £375 (All Line Rover). Instead, we were quoted prices of £436.50, £401.50 and £593.50.

“Other” trips

The most common instance where the train companies quoted incorrect prices on scenario’s other than the two multi-trip scenarios, was when we asked for the price of a First Class return (going out on the coming Saturday, returning the following Saturday). The most one would need to pay for such a journey would be a Saver Return, plus the cost of the upgrade to First Class, each way.

For example, on TransPennine Express we asked:

“I want to go First Class from Manchester to Windermere traveling on Saturday morning and returning the following Saturday. I'm not sure of the exact time I will be traveling. What is the best priced ticket available?”

We could have been quoted the cost of the Saver Return (£25.60) plus upgrades (£6 each way). This would have totaled £37.60. Instead we were quoted £62.70 – which is £25.10 more than we would need to pay if we bought the Weekend-First upgrade.

Similarly on Virgin Trains, we asked:

“I want to go First Class from London to Stafford traveling on Saturday morning and returning the following Saturday, I'm not sure of the exact time I will be traveling, what is the best priced ticket available?”

We could have been quoted the cost of the Saver Return plus upgrades (£73.20). Instead we were quoted £136.50 twice – £63.30 more expensive than the Weekend-First upgrade.

Appendix A lists all the instances where an incorrect price was given and shows:

- The train company concerned
- The scenario read out
- The verbatim response
- Comments, including the correct price

2.4. Clarity of the call centre staff

Callers were asked to rate the clarity (how clearly they could hear and understand what the telesales staff were saying to them) on a 0-5 scale, where 0 was indistinct, 3 was OK and 5 was very clear. The results were as follows:

Table 5: clarity of call centre staff

Train company	First Great Western	GNER	TransPennine Express	South West Trains	Virgin Trains
0 – indistinct	0	0	0	0	0
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	2	2	0	0	7
3 – OK	23	11	13	11	23
4	13	14	15	16	14
5 – very clear	12	23	22	23	6
Mean score out of 5	3.7	4.2	4.2	4.2	3.4

GNER, TransPennine Express and South West Trains all score an average of 4.2, with nearly half the calls rated as very clear. First Great Western was below this with a mean of 3.7 but with only two calls scoring 2. Virgin Trains was rated the lowest on clarity of operator, with a mean of 3.4 and 7 of their 50 calls rated at 2 (less than OK).

2.5. Helpfulness of the operator

Callers rated operators on a similar scale, ranging from 0 for rude through to 5 for excellent. The results are:

Table 6: helpfulness of call centre staff

Train company	First Great Western	GNER	TransPennine Express	South West Trains	Virgin Trains
0 – rude	0	0	0	0	1
1	1	0	0	0	1
2	3	0	1	0	1
3 – businesslike	13	5	10	15	15
4	26	28	21	22	24
5 – excellent	7	17	18	13	8
Mean	3.7	4.2	4.1	4.0	3.7

The results are very similar to those for the clarity question. GNER, TransPennine Express and South West Trains rate most highly, with only one caller to TransPennine Express rating them at 2 and all other calls to these three train companies rated 3-5. First Great Western and Virgin Trains both achieved a mean of 3.7, with 4 and 3 scores of 2 or less respectively (and with one caller to Virgin classifying the call centre operator as rude). In general however, callers rated call centre staff as pleasant and helpful.

2.6. System automation

In most cases, the telesales system was fully or semi automated, with just 15 of the 250 calls being designated as not automated. In most cases, information entered into the automated system did not have to be repeated, although this was only true in half the calls made to Virgin. For the other four operators, there were very few occasions when information had to be repeated when getting through to the call centre operator.

Appendix A – details of incorrect prices given

Train Company	Scenario	Response	Comments
Virgin Trains	Q.9 I want to go First Class from London to Stafford travelling on Saturday morning and returning the following Saturday, I'm not sure of the exact time I will be travelling, what is the best priced ticket available?	London to Stafford on Saturday morning [as per scenario]. Confirmed I was travelling alone, did not have a railcard, had no time preferences, and wanted to travel First Class both ways. Agent offered me a First Class Open single on the outward journey and a Value Advance First Class for the return journey: total: £136.50.	£136.50: Could be - at most (Saver plus upgrade) - £73.20. Overcharge of £63.30
Virgin Trains	Q.9 I want to go First Class from London to Stafford travelling on Saturday morning and returning the following Saturday, I'm not sure of the exact time I will be travelling, what is the best priced ticket available?	London (Euston) to Stafford next Saturday, First Class, [as per scenario]. Confirmed I was travelling by myself and did not have a railcard. Agent said there were no Advance Purchase tickets available for tomorrow morning. It would have to be a First Class Open ticket on the outward journey priced at £108.50 and a Return Single First Class ticket priced at £28. Outward journey: earliest train leaving at 9:03am and arriving at 11:19am. Return journey: leaving at 9:13am and getting in at 11:25am.	£136.50: Should be - at most (Saver plus upgrade) - £73.20. Overcharge of £63.30
Virgin Trains	Q.10 Next week, I am making four journeys they are: Monday London to Manchester going in AM peak (8AM), coming back PM peak (5PM), Wednesday London to Liverpool, Thursday London to Stafford and on Friday London to Birmingham New Street. What is the best price I can get? All the journeys are in peak times.	Agent asked how many people were travelling, what time I would leave London. Said just myself and leaving around 8am and returning around 5pm. London to Manchester: £202 return ticket./ London to Liverpool: £189 return ticket./ London to Stafford: £139 return ticket./ London to Birmingham New Street: £108 return ticket.	£638. Max charge should be £375 with a Standard 7 Day All-Line Rail Rover. Overcharged by £263!
GNER	Q.14 I am making three journeys from London to Newcastle Upon Tyne next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM, coming back 5PM) going and coming back, what is the best ticket(s) for me to get?	3 journeys next week from London to Newcastle on Monday, Wednesday and Friday [as per scenario]. /Monday: a standard open ticket is £215. You can travel at any time./ Wednesday: leaving at 8am and returning on the 17:32 will be £141.50. If left open, it will cost £215./ Friday: £215, same price as Monday./ Agent said these were the only prices available for these trips.	£571.50 - Should only be £375 with All-Line Rail Rover. Over charged by £196.50

GNER	Q.14 I am making three journeys from London to Newcastle Upon Tyne next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM, coming back 5PM) going and coming back, what is the best ticket(s) for me to get?	3 journeys from London to Newcastle next week [as per scenario]. Confirmed I was travelling alone and did not have a railcard. Agent offered: travelling on Monday: a Standard Single on the outward journey priced at £107.50 and coming back on the 16:55, an Advance Purchase ticket (prices may vary for this ticket) for £28.50. He said it would be similar prices for other days.	£408- see above - Overcharged by £33
GNER	Q.18 Next week, I am making four journeys, they are: Monday London to Newcastle going in AM peak (8AM), coming back PM peak (5PM), Wednesday London to Liverpool, Thursday London to Stafford and on Friday London to Birmingham New Street. What is the best price I can get? All the journeys are at peak times.	London to Newcastle: standard open return priced at £215. Other option is: standard open single £107.50 with the return on the 17:32 at £34 bringing the total to £141.50 or the return on the 18:10 bringing the total at £136...Subject to availability./ Euston to Liverpool: I picked Liverpool Lime Street: to go out on the 8:17 will cost £94.50 and the return on the 17:15 will be £12.50 bringing the total at £107./ London to Stafford from Euston: outward journey: 8:17 will be £67.50 and return on the 17:12 will be £12.50./ London to Birmingham New Street: outward journey: £54 at 8:10 and return on the 17:00 will be £54 also./ Agent stated the only GNER journey was the Newcastle journey, the others were Virgin.	£436.5- should be £375 max. Overcharge of £61.50
GNER	Q.18 Next week, I am making four journeys, they are: Monday London to Newcastle going in AM peak (8AM), coming back PM peak (5PM), Wednesday London to Liverpool, Thursday London to Stafford and on Friday London to Birmingham New Street. What is the best price I can get? All the journeys are at peak times.	London to Newcastle: asked if it was first class or standard; to which I replied whichever was cheapest. He said there was a Standard Open Return ticket at peak time: £215./ London to Liverpool: £75.50 going and £24 on the return; bringing the total at £99.50./ London to Stafford: £39 in total; £21 going and £18 on the return./ London to Birmingham New Street: £24 each way; £48 in total.	£401.5 - Overcharge of £26.50
GNER	Q.18 Next week, I am making four journeys, they are: Monday London to Newcastle going in AM peak (8AM), coming back PM peak (5PM), Wednesday London to Liverpool, Thursday London to Stafford and on Friday London to Birmingham New Street. What is the best price I can get? All the journeys are at peak times.	No overall ticket would have to do journeys one by one. Asked if had railcard said no. London to Newcastle. If 8:00am would cost Standard open return £215.00. If prepared to leave at 8:30am Business Saver would cost £134.50. London to Liverpool. At 8:17am would cost full price £189.00.If prepared to leave at 9:15am would cost £42.50. London to Stafford. if leave at 8:17am costs £135.00. If prepared to go later at 9:17am costs £33.50. London to Birm New Street. Leave at 8:17 its £135.00.If prepared to leave at 9:17 it costs £43.20	£593.5 - Overcharge of £218.50

First Great Western	Q.25 I am making three journeys from London to Swindon next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM, coming back 5PM) going and coming back, what is the best ticket(s) for me to get?	London to Swindon; 3 journeys [as per scenario]. Agent insisted on having a date. Said next week, Mon 13th or Wed 15th. She said there was a season ticket available but I would have to call the National Rail Enquiries line on 08457484950. The other option would be a standard Saver Return ticket at £85 for each journey.	£255: Weekly Season is £147.80 - That's overcharge of £107.20
First Great Western	Q.25 I am making three journeys from London to Swindon next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM, coming back 5PM) going and coming back, what is the best ticket(s) for me to get?	3 journeys to Swindon next week [as per scenario] on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday. Agent asked how many were travelling, if I had a railcard and if I wanted a First Class or Standard Class ticket. Said I was travelling alone, did not have a railcard and wanted the cheapest ticket./ Monday: If leaving on the 8:00am or 7:15am, it will be £48.50; for the return journey, he said he could get me a £15 return ticket; total: £63.50...Tickets subject to availability and on a first come, first served basis. Could not get any further information as agent wanted me to purchase tickets for the first trip before he would look up the other two journeys.	£190.50 - overcharge of £42.70 (see above)
First Great Western	Q.25 I am making three journeys from London to Swindon next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM, coming back 5PM) going and coming back, what is the best ticket(s) for me to get?	3 journeys. London to Swindon next week [as per scenario]. Agent said there was a Standard Open return ticket priced at £85. Confirmed I did not have a railcard./ Tuesday: she offered a Business First Class on the outward for £48.50 and a Standard return ticket for the 17:11 train priced at £15; total: £63.50 return./ Wednesday: she offered a Business Advance A Standard for the 8:00am at £35.50 and a £11 ticket for the return: total: £46.50./ Thursday: same as Wednesday: £46.50 return.	Total £195 - overcharge of £4.50
First Great Western	Q.25 I am making three journeys from London to Swindon next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM, coming back 5PM) going and coming back, what is the best ticket(s) for me to get?	3 returns from London Paddington to Swindon next Monday, Wednesday, and Friday leaving at 8am, returning at 5pm. Agent said there weren't any Leisure Advance tickets left and I would have to get open returns for £85 each day. The total is £255. I asked him whether these were direct trains and he said as far as he knew, they were.	£255 - overcharge of £107.20

First Great Western	Q.30 I am travelling from Lewisham to Oxford (next week). Please tell me the best way of getting there (i.e. where should I change) next Friday at 9AM and coming back on Sunday. I want a flexible ticket both ways as not sure of the exact time I will need to travel. What can you offer me? IF PROMPTED SAY "CHEAPEST".	Lewisham to Oxford. Agent asked for the day. Leaving on Nov 17th coming back on Sun 19th [as per scenario], not sure of the time. Agent left me on hold for about 20 mins and hung up.	HUNG UP
South West Trains	Q.34 I am making four journeys from London to Weymouth next week all travelling in the peak (leaving 8AM, coming back 5PM) going and coming back. What is the best ticket(s) for me to get?	All four journeys to Weymouth cost the same so for trains leaving at 7:45 returning at 17:00 return ticket total cost is £33.60 each day when booked in advance.	£134.4- weekly season £130.20: overcharge of £4.20
TransPennine Express	Q.45 I want to go First Class from Manchester to Windermere travelling on Saturday morning and returning the following Saturday. I'm not sure of the exact time I will be travelling. What is the best priced ticket available?	Q.45 I want to go First Class from Manchester to Windermere travelling on Saturday morning and returning the following Saturday. I'm not sure of the exact time I will be travelling. What is the best priced ticket available?	Saver Return plus upgrades (£25.60 and £6 each way =£37.60). Thus overcharged £25.10