



Mystery shop of rail ticket retailing – research summary

March 2007

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Introduction

The latest results of the Passenger Focus National Passenger Survey¹ indicate that almost one in five passengers (19%) is dissatisfied with ticket buying facilities offered at stations. Passenger Focus commissioned a mystery shop survey to better understand the current level of service that is being experienced by passengers purchasing rail tickets in Great Britain.

How was the mystery shopping carried out?

In autumn 2006 a team of specially trained mystery shoppers employed by Continental Research, an independent market research agency, attempted to buy tickets at different train stations, from a selection of train operating companies telesales teams and on-board trains on the Cardiff Valley lines.

The mystery shoppers behaved like ordinary passengers but secretly recorded details of their shops in great detail. For example, they used a stop-watch to measure queuing times and counted how many ticket machines were out of order or the proportion of ticket windows that were open. In addition Passenger Focus' own staff carried out a mystery shop of a number of different websites that passengers can buy rail tickets from. All mystery shopping was carried out between mid October and mid November 2006.

The results of the shops are provided in full reports and are available for different methods of ticket purchase. This document summarises these five detailed reports that are available from www.passengerfocus.org.uk

Key findings

Station ticket offices

The mystery shoppers made 421 visits to stations and found that the average queue time at ticket windows was two and a half minutes, however there was a great deal of variation. During peak hours, just over one in ten passengers (11%) had to queue for over five minutes which is longer than targets in the rail industry's 'Ticketing Settlement Agreement' of five minutes or less. Almost

¹ National Rail Passenger Survey Autumn 2006, a customer satisfaction survey by train operating company with a national sample size of 24,447 rail passengers carried out by Continental research on behalf of Passenger Focus. 15,003 of 24,447 passengers answered question on ticket buying facilities.

a quarter of peak-time shops at the largest stations in Great Britain² involved queues of over five minutes during peak weekday periods (24%).

The off-peak queuing time target is three minutes or less; however, the shoppers found that in almost three out of ten (29%) off-peak occasions they had to queue for longer than the agreed three-minute target. During off-peak periods the largest stations³ had the longest queue times with 48% of passengers queuing for over three minutes.

In the vast majority of cases, staff provided accurate prices for tickets. This is in line with earlier research carried out by Passenger Focus that identified that passengers trust rail staff to give them the best deal⁴.

Instances of misquoting ticket prices at stations were concentrated around not advising passengers of the availability of the All-Line Rover ticket (useful for multiple return trips during the week) and where the ticket clerk failed to mention the availability of First Class upgrades during the weekend which meant our shoppers might have paid more than was necessary.

Station ticket machines

Larger stations were more likely to have ticket machines than smaller stations and shoppers found that 96% of ticket machines were in working order. Generally queuing times were short - for nearly three quarters of shoppers (72%) nobody was in the queue in front of them and 87% queued for only one minute or less. During peak times no mystery shoppers had to wait for five minutes or more.

During off-peak times only 2% of shoppers had to queue over three minutes during the week but 5% did so at the weekend. Those queuing more than three minutes during off-peak periods were concentrated at large stations, but not the largest⁵.

On-train purchases in South Wales

A total of 56 mystery shops were made on trains in South Wales on train journeys involving un-staffed stations where passengers could only purchase tickets onboard the train as the stations sampled did not have ticket machines, barriers or ticket windows.

² Network Rail groups stations into six groups – A-F – on the basis of both size and facilities. A-Category stations are the largest (e.g. Victoria), with F being the smallest (e.g. Taffs Well).

³ Category A

⁴ Passengers Requirements of Rail Fare, Quantitative Research Report, Outlook, July 2006.

⁵ Queues of over three minutes in the off peak were concentrated at Category B stations

For just under a quarter (23%) of the 56 trips made, our mystery shoppers were unable to purchase a ticket. Shoppers found 18% of their trips were on ‘very busy or overcrowded’ trains and were unable to buy a ticket for any of these journeys. Two Routes, Merthyr to Cardiff and Rhymney to Cardiff were harder to purchase tickets on than the other four routes.

Mystery shoppers found it particularly difficult to pay for their ticket at weekends where this was not possible in over a half of all cases (58%) compared to only 14% of shops on weekdays.

The shoppers found no signs of rudeness amongst staff and nearly three quarters (72%) found the onboard ticket staff to be “excellent, very courteous and helpful”. Compared to other methods of ticket purchase, on-train sales staff achieved the highest scores for helpfulness and politeness.

Telesales

The performance of five selected train company telesales operations were mystery shopped: First Great Western, GNER, TransPennine Express, South West Trains and Virgin Trains. 50 calls were made to each telesales centre, and on each occasion the caller requested a price for a specific journey scenario.

The average waiting time⁶ to speak to an operator for four of the train companies was over eight minutes. TransPennine Express was significantly shorter at 4.8 minutes and GNER the longest at just under ten minutes’ average waiting time.

There were a large number of cases where shoppers had to wait for more than ten minutes to speak to an operator, for GNER this was for 20 of the 50 shops whilst for TransPennine Express it was for only 5 of the 50 shops. South West Trains shoppers experienced delays of over ten minutes for 16 shops, First Great Western for 11 shops and Virgin Trains for 14 of the 50 shops. TransPennine Express refused to provide a price or hung up for 7 of the 50 calls. GNER was the only telesales centre to provide a price in every single case, which needs to be balanced against their higher waiting times than other Train Operating Companies.

In general, train companies quoted the correct prices for tickets. However it was of concern that in a number of instances an incorrect price was quoted. These were mostly for scenarios that involved either several trips per week on the same route or for several trips in a more complex

⁶ Waiting time defined as time from first call to getting through to an operator.

journey. Our shoppers found that for these multiple trip scenarios, in some instances they were being quoted hundreds of pounds more than they should have been.

On 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 to pay for this combination of trips would be £375 (All-Line Rover). Instead, we were quoted prices of £436.50, £401.50 and £593.50. Although it should be noted that the All-Line Rover is not likely to be a ticket that is used by many passengers, it should have been offered in these cases.

Internet purchases

All mystery shopping for telesales was carried out by Passenger Focus staff. Mystery shops were made of www.nationalrail.co.uk, www.thetrainline.co.uk and eighteen individual train companies' websites.

The www.nationalrail.co.uk website was the quickest at processing queries. In 74% of cases it processed travel information in 0-5 seconds compared with 57% for www.thetrainline.co.uk and 51% for train company websites.

Out of 18 routes that we shopped for processing times and parity of prices, only one journey was priced differently on the three websites shopped. This was for the London – Peterborough journey. The GNER website was offering its Value Advance tickets at a discount compared to both www.nationalrail.co.uk and www.thetrainline.co.uk. For example, GNER offered a price of £67.60, whilst the other two websites quoted £76.60.

All train company websites that sell tickets, except Chiltern, offer the option of insurance. All Train companies that offer insurance offer it at £1 each way. Unlike the train companies' websites, www.thetrainline.co.uk customers have to opt out of the insurance rather than opt in. Trainline charges £2 for using a credit card. None of the train company sites that we checked was found to charge for this.

On nine out of 12 routes where we tested for the availability of quota controlled advance purchase tickets (these tend to be the cheapest available to passengers), it would have been possible to purchase them up to a day before departure. The availability of these tickets was tested for travel two hours either side of noon for a journey on the 11th November (outbound) and 13th November (return). However on three routes, London – Ipswich; Liverpool – London; and London -

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 of travel.

Conclusions

This research has identified a number of areas in which train operators are performing well. Ticket sales staff at stations were found to be helpful and courteous which is in line with earlier research carried out for Passenger Focus that found passengers trusted rail staff to give them the best deal and make sense of a sometimes complicated fares and ticketing structure. However a number of problems do exist such as long queuing times particularly at off peak times. Queue times were found to be long at off peak times, with almost a half of passengers (48%) at the largest stations queuing for longer than the industry guidelines of three minutes or less. This suggests that the rail industry is not staffing ticket offices adequately at off peak times.

Queue lengths at ticket machines were generally short. However, some passengers will not use them, and our mystery shoppers found that railcard options were not always available on the machines. The rail industry is likely to further embrace new technology for ticket retailing and this could deliver real benefits for passengers and reduce queue lengths; however, they need to ensure that passengers can be confident of getting the best deal regardless of how they choose to buy tickets.

Passengers travelling on trains in South Wales sometimes find it difficult to pay for their journey; this is an issue that needs to be looked into further by the rail industry.

Many ticket sales staff are not aware off or are not communicating the benefits of All-line Rovers. Whilst this is clearly a ticket which will not be useful to the majority of passengers, where it is useful it should be offered, similarly weekend First Class upgrades should be offered as an option where passengers are clear that they are travelling at weekends on lines where they are available and no better offers are available.

Different websites do offer different deals. GNER was cheaper than other websites for some of its own tickets. www.thetrainline.co.uk charge a fee for using credit cards whilst the other websites we shopped do not.

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