



Anthony Smith: 'It's astonishing that the cost of your product is not clear'

THE REAL ACID TEST

Do bus passengers think they are getting value for money - and what motivates them to say 'yes' or 'no' when asked? New research discovers it's about much more than simply the price of the ticket. Mel Holley previews the findings from Passenger Focus

Passenger Focus' (PF) annual Bus Passenger survey gives a very good snapshot of what people are thinking about their bus services on a day-to-day basis. Crucially, rather than asking general 'what do you think about buses' questions, PF asks real passengers specifically about the bus journey they've just undertaken, to get an accurate response, rather than one based on general feelings.

Within the results, it highlights various areas that give more cause for concern than others. Generally, bus passengers are happy, but with a wide variation across the country, it's no surprise to find that there is a wide range of ratings for value-for-money - from 35% in the West of England Partnership area (Bath, Bristol etc.) up to 70% in Nottingham city.

With a very broad spectrum of scores, PF

has probed more about what it is that drives perceptions of value for money (VFM). Says PF CEO Anthony Smith: "If you can understand that, then you're on the first step on the way to doing something about it."

VFM is a very interesting issue, he adds, as it's not about the price of the ticket. "You are asking them: 'what was it like overall' - it's a good catch-all question.

"For me it is the litmus test of the whole of service; the VFM question." PF avoids commenting on the absolute levels of fares, because this cost is a "very personal issue, whereas VFM is a much more considered - and actionable - thing to ask about."

The result is that fares in one area may not be 'expensive' - compared with similar conurbations - but it is other factors that are taken into account.

To study this, PF ran a dozen 1.5-hour bus passenger focus groups, two in each area:

Bristol, Manchester, Leeds, Nottingham, Leicester and Stafford. The latter was chosen due to its young person fares scheme.

The results will be published in the autumn, but ahead of this, some valuable conclusions have emerged.

The headline is that passengers judge VFM by balancing the price paid, with the service received, against other modes of transport. And, on the whole, bus passengers feel they are getting VFM, compared with other modes of transport.

"In particular people are judging the bus against the car - whether they use one or not - about their perceptions of the cost of the car."

Where the great uncertainty comes, says Anthony, is when you ask passengers 'are you happy you're getting the best fare for your journey?' People are "very confused."

Says Anthony: "What's clear is there is an

absolute lack of information about fares and about what's available."

As part of the 'stimulus' material for the focus groups, PF got some information about fares and ticket types. "People were grabbing them, and saying 'wow, this is amazing, this is really useful; can we keep it?'"

People were looking at it and saying, "Oh, I can get that sort of season ticket, that's very useful, I'll get that in future."

There's a real lack of knowledge, and a sense of habit, for example people buying singles rather than a day ticket. "There's not a lot of information on offer and it's not easy to find out," says Anthony.

"Where are people getting their information? It's not at the bus stop; you can ask the driver, but it's a bit confrontational; it's on the side of the bus - well sort of. It's quite hard to get some of this information, so passengers feel a bit in the dark about what's going on."

Some operators might say there is a commercial and marketing imperative to advertise the fares and offers, such as inside the bus. "You would have thought so," agrees Anthony, "but clearly it's not getting through particularly well. We did not sense from these groups that this information is reaching people in that way."

In an attempt to track fares - in the same way as it does in the rail market - PF attempted to select a basket of 100 fares around the country that it could track over time. "Getting the information was very difficult in some cases," says Anthony.

"There's limited stuff on the websites, sometimes we had to ring head office and ask what the fare is.

"Once we rang a head office, somebody didn't know, they stuck their head out of a window and shouted at a driver: 'Alf, what's the fare from the railway station to the hospital.'

"It's astonishing that the cost of your product is not clear, even to yourself a lot of the time. If companies can't explain their fares to themselves, they haven't got a hope of explaining them to the passengers. And passengers haven't got a hope of understanding it - and they won't trust you.

"If it's not clear what it costs, and you're not being offered the best value for your journey, you won't trust the operator - and I think it's very, very, corrosive." Anthony adds that this doesn't apply to every passenger, but clarity of fares is a "big issue" for the industry.

When PF dug into this, it discovered that some service factors, not cost, are bigger issues for driving VFM. It's no big surprise that key drivers of VFM are punctuality,



Value for money is about more than just price, but also service received shows research

frequency, the ability to board the first bus, level of crowding, and availability of information - plus ticket cost.

"So if you're getting some of those right, you're going to be pleasing passengers."

Interestingly, some of the items in the middle of the table, such as bus driver behaviour and attitude, bus stop condition, and inter-changeability with other modes, are not as important.

"It's the clunky stuff: punctuality, frequency, can I get on the bus. So if you're offering very cheap tickets, but not hitting those things, then you still won't get VFM.

"You could have quite expensive tickets, but if you're delivering all the basics, people might be quite happy to pay."

The outcome is four recommendations:

- A central information source - in theory Transport Direct/Traveline does this, but is "patchy" says Anthony
- Clearer, standardised, ticketing structures
- Electronic pay-as-go card systems: People can see the advantages
- Provide more information - real time passenger information, fares information etc.

"Chipping away at these things will help the industry improve the VFM scores."

Within different passenger groups, commuters are less positive about VFM and record the lowest scores. They feel that travel is a "tax on work" even though they may have made the choice about where they live. Leisure travellers are happier.

"Are they bus passengers or bus

customers?" asks Anthony. "You've got a range of people - some of whom consider themselves to be passengers - because they have no choice, some are leisure customers because they have got a choice. You should treat these as customers as they have got a choice as to whether they come back or not.

"At the passenger end of the spectrum, you should aspire to utter indifference in your service. People should not notice it. You turn up at the bus stop - real time information, bus is coming in three minutes; it comes, you get on, you get a seat, it's the right temperature; you get off at the other end: how's your journey? I didn't notice it.

"It's a funny kind of thing; but be boring, aspire to indifference. You can't please passengers, but what you can do is displease them.

"It's a quite different mentality to customers - who you can please - and you can make a difference to, such as with driver interaction."

Separately, other research on smart-ticketing looks at the Oxford SmartZone - the only live commercial multi-operator smart system. Face-to-face interviews with 1,000 bus users in Oxford took place. The headlines are that people like the smartcard; they find it easy to use, topping it up is very easy and overall satisfaction with the smartcard is exceptionally high.

This report will be published in the next month or so, but it shows that smartcard users are more likely to agree strongly that buses provide VFM. In addition, 28% of people claimed to have used buses more as a result of having a smartcard, further increasing VFM perceptions.

The most interesting part of the research is that one of the main topping up points in Oxford is in Debenhams. Out of the blue, other retailers approached Debenhams and said 'how can we get this SmartZone outlet, because it's pulling people into the store'.

"That's a very positive image - and that's just what bus needs," concludes Anthony. ■

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