

# How rail passengers really feel

June 2016





## Chief executive's introduction



Independent watchdog Transport Focus strives to give all transport users as powerful a voice as those that provide transport services.

As well as producing research on various topics as they become relevant, we also produce the world's largest published rail satisfaction survey (NRPS)<sup>1</sup> twice a year.

By creating satisfaction ratings for various core elements of services, transport providers can find out where improvements are needed and deliver change where it matters to their passengers<sup>2</sup>.

NRPS is published twice a year. But in today's 'always on' society passengers, keen to make their voices heard, often use social media and other live channels for feedback to train operators 'in the moment'. Passengers are providing a constant stream of timely feedback that could be put to good use.

We wanted to tap into this feedback and to devise a way of 'taking the temperature' between the waves of the main NRPS survey.

To help the rail industry get 'actionable' data from the feedback, we developed a way to track sentiment over time. We ran this activity for four months, during a period of disruption, to test its effectiveness in providing weekly feedback to be used to target immediate actions for improvement.

There are big projects coming up at Waterloo and Euston. Let's use this opportunity to put lessons into practice, and focus on really passenger-centric communications.

Our three key recommendations are:

- be open about delivery and the problems and the duration of any problems to help set revised expectations
- make some offer that shows passenger they haven't been forgotten and that acknowledges problems experienced – perhaps the Government's quick implementation of its welcome promise to cut the threshold for Delay Repay to 15 minutes from the current 30
- make sure there are less 'really bad' days – improve recovery when things start to go wrong.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/research/national-passenger-survey-introduction/>

<sup>2</sup> Our 2014 report *Rail Passenger Priorities for Improvement* sets out what matters most following a one-off survey of more than 3500 rail passengers.

## How passengers really feel

We developed a way to track passenger sentiment over time, and use it to provide feedback that train operators are able to act on. We created an app that asked passengers to select an image that best reflected their journey. We developed and tested these faces with passengers, to show a range of different emotions.



### The pilot: London and the South East area

Huge amounts of investment are going into rebuilding London Bridge station and the Thameslink programme. When complete these will provide passengers with a much better service: more capacity, more services and a vastly improved station at London Bridge. But carrying out the improvement work while continuing to run services has inevitably been difficult.

In summer 2015, rail minister Claire Perry MP invited us to join a taskforce addressing issues raised during a period of disruption linked to London Bridge and the Thameslink programme.

This was the perfect opportunity to test our emotional tracker over a continuous period in a real-life situation. Working collaboratively with the rail industry, we ran the tracker on six routes affected by the London Bridge redevelopment, from December 2015. We gathered comments from passengers on a day-to-day basis. Over the course of four months 364 passengers recorded comments on just under 13,000 journeys.

This initial run demonstrated how people's experience of their journeys changes within minutes of a delay or other change. This, in the context of publicly-available social media commentary<sup>3</sup>, provides a picture of change to help 'take the temperature' of passengers at any given point.

---

<sup>3</sup> We ran pilot social media monitoring activities to see how it might inform passenger research: <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/social-media-monitoring-pilot-research-report/>

This as-it-happens feedback was then discussed at a senior level, including regular performance meetings with the rail minister, Network Rail, Southern, Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR), and Southeastern.

In the process, we learned some key lessons on ways to minimise the impact when things go wrong. You can read more about the development and detail of our emotional tracker on our website<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research/publications/publications/emotional-tracker>.

## Key lessons

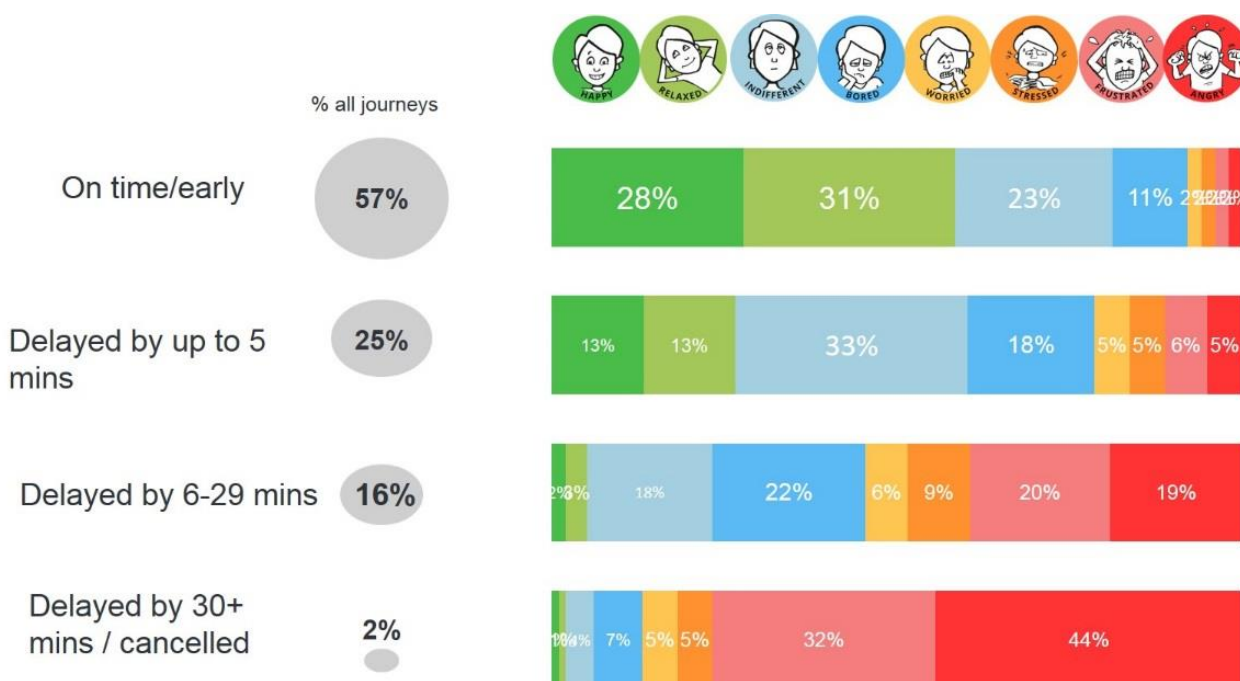
Passengers expressed a range of emotions for their journeys - it was not simply a case of an individual always being happy or angry throughout the four months. On average the participants reported five different emotions, with a quarter of them using all eight emotions.

There were two key factors that affected passenger sentiment – being on time and the ability to get a seat. This is no great surprise; such issues have always been a core concern for commuters. However, what the research shows is how sensitive passengers are to delays<sup>5</sup> and how other factors can help mitigate some of the more negative emotions experienced (see **What does this mean?** on p10).

### Delays

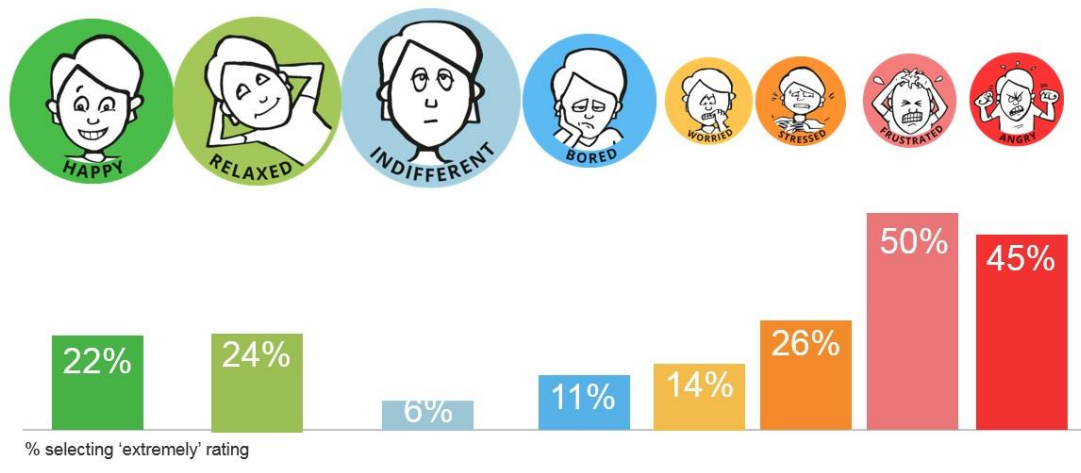
A major issue for passengers is volatile performance. When things work well they are happy or relaxed, but they are quickly annoyed by even small delays. We looked at how emotions change as the train is delayed.

We found that passengers moved from happy to less-positive emotions very quickly – within five minutes. When comparing passengers who arrived early or on time, with those who were delayed by less than five minutes, we can see that passengers' emotions very quickly change from happy or relaxed to being indifferent. As delays get longer the proportion angry and frustrated passengers increases significantly.



<sup>5</sup> Also highlighted in our report (produced jointly with the Office of Rail and Road) *Train punctuality: the passenger perspective*.

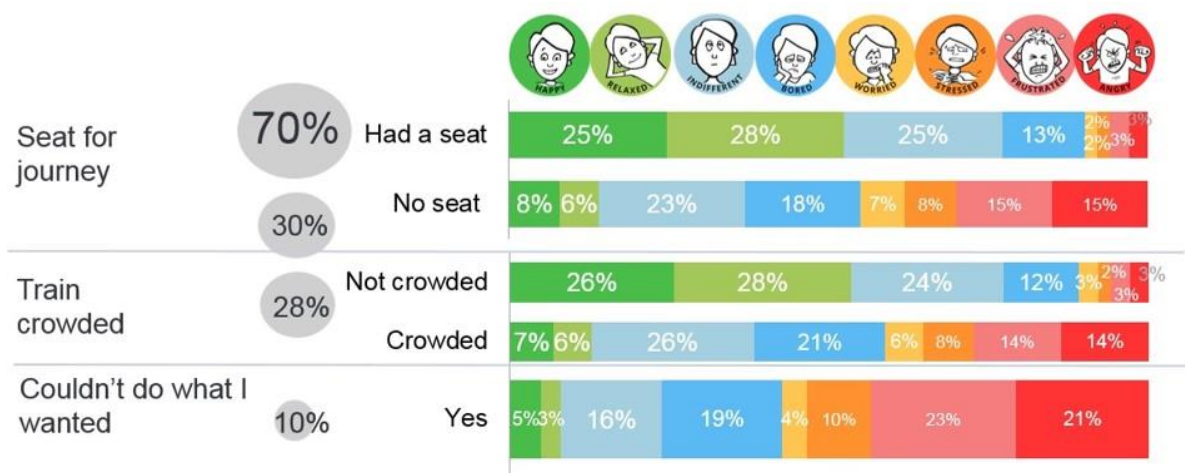
We also asked passengers how strongly they felt emotions, on a scale of one to five. The chart below shows the proportion of people selecting each emotion (size of circle) then the proportion who rated it the top score for 'intensity' of the emotion felt. We can see the two most negative emotions (frustrated and angry) were felt most strongly, even if they aren't the most common emotion.



When there is a series of 'bad' days in terms of performance, passengers report feeling frustrated and angry and we know from previous work on passengers' trust in the industry more widely (*Passengers' relationship with the rail industry*<sup>6</sup>) that these powerful negative emotions last much longer than does a more 'indifferent journey'.

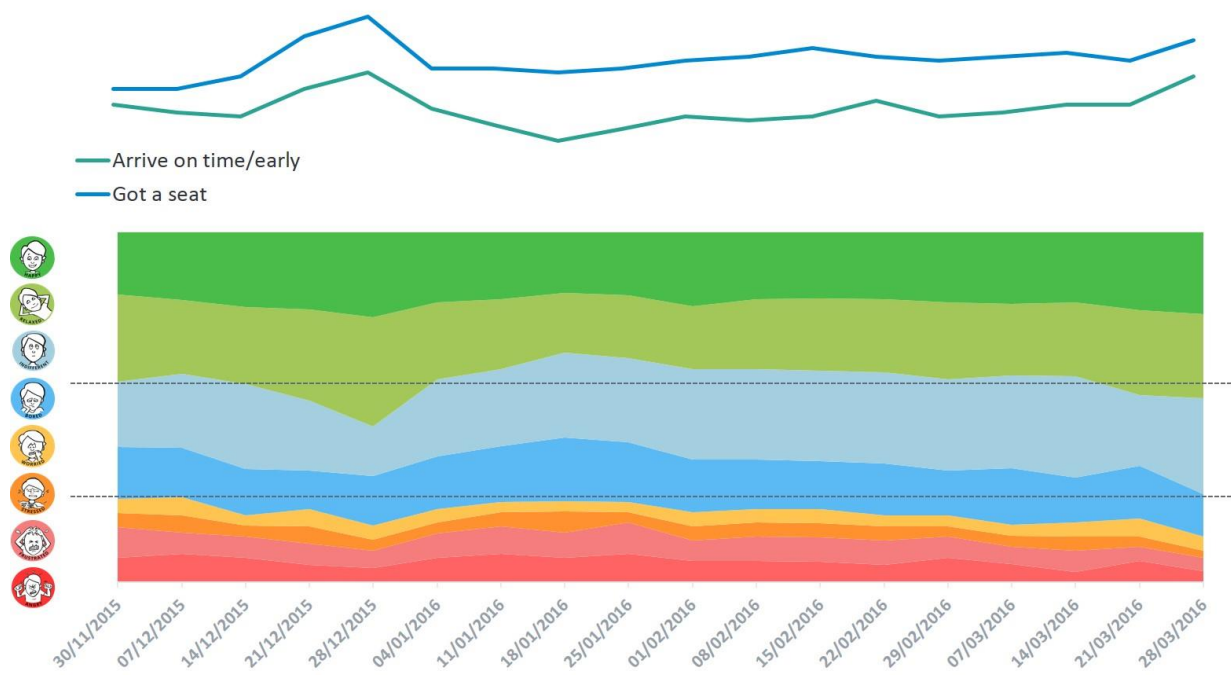
### Crowding

Crowding is the second main contributing factor to negative emotions. Negative emotions rise rapidly when passengers aren't able to get a seat, experience crowding or are not able to get things done – for example, not able to use their smartphone.



<sup>6</sup> <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/passengers-relationship-with-the-rail-industry/>

We saw that over the Christmas period, when fewer commuters were travelling and trains were more punctual and less crowded, passengers were more likely to be happy and relaxed. There was a similar, although less pronounced effect, around Easter. The chart below shows a rise in those reporting early trains and being able to get a seat, which coincides with an increase in 'happy' and 'relaxed' emotions.



While punctuality and getting a seat were the main drivers of emotion we could also detect other, more human, influences. Women tended to show slightly stronger positive emotions than men and there was also a bit of a 'Friday feeling'. Positivity increased in the afternoon/evening journey, and built throughout the week into the weekend.

A person's mood did influence emotions. A good day at work or simply looking forward to the weekend could have an impact on people saying that they were happy with the journey. Likewise being tired or in a bad mood could make the difference between being bored with the journey rather than being indifferent or relaxed.

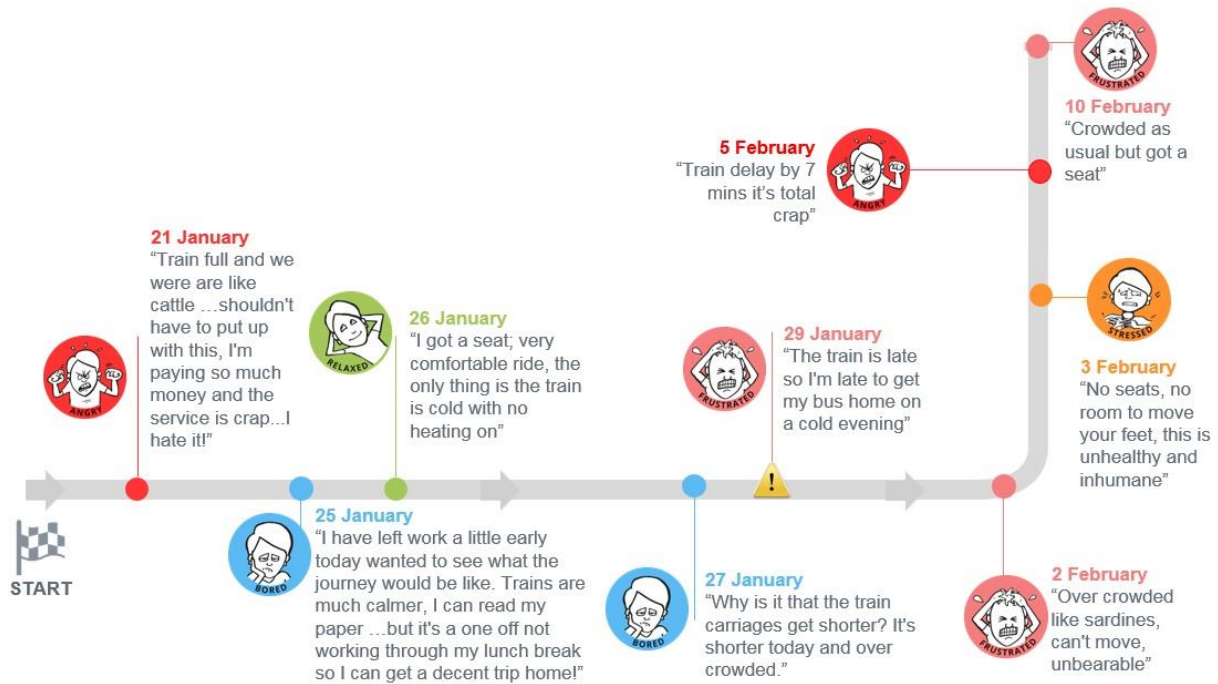
However, mood played much less of a part in the more negative emotions – these were driven much more by punctuality and getting a seat.



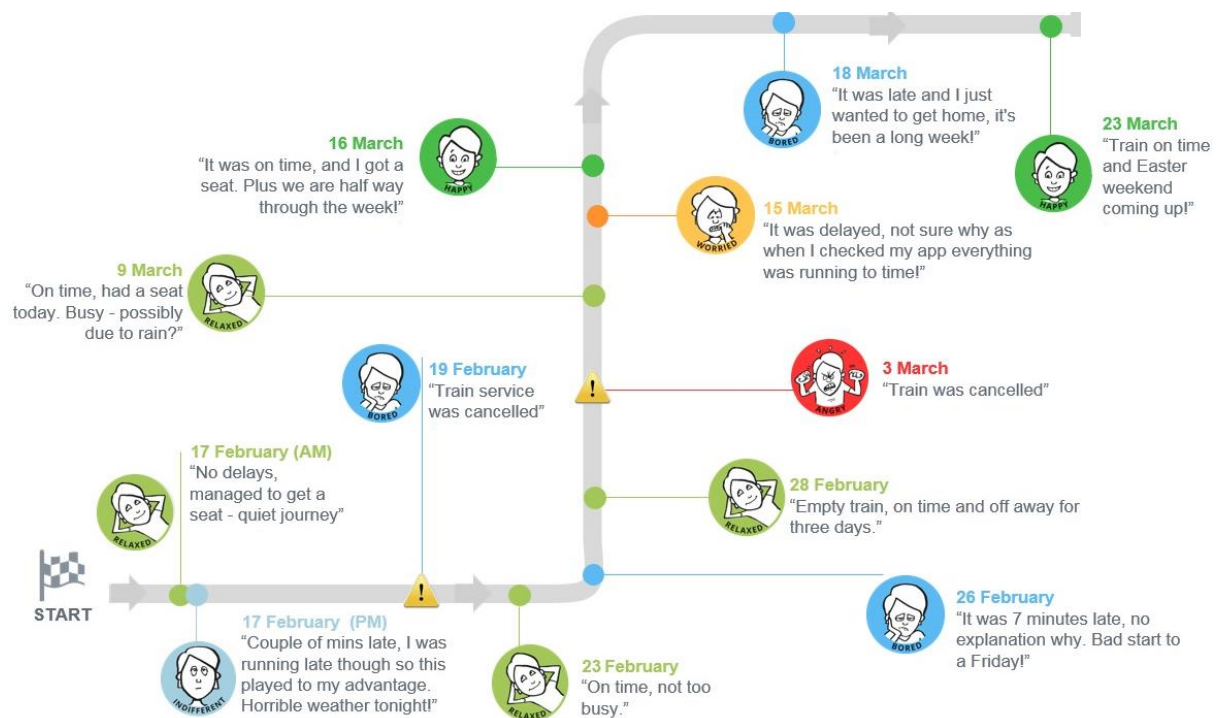
## Commuter journeys

The data we collected allowed us to create 'commuter diaries' on the routes in our study.

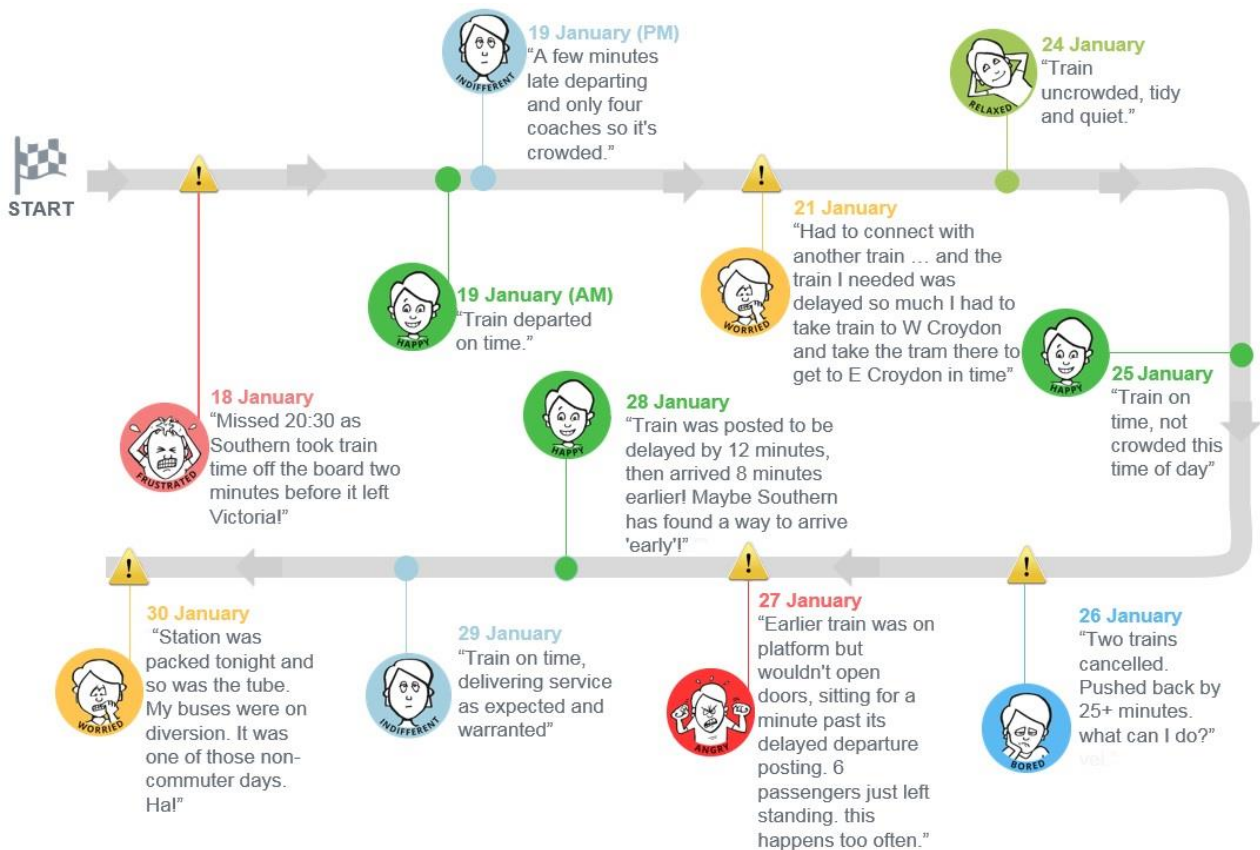
'Anna', aged 20-34, travels to/from Lewisham and London Bridge on Southeastern, using a monthly season ticket.



'Beth' aged 45-54, travels to/from Grove Park and London Bridge, commuting to work using a season ticket.

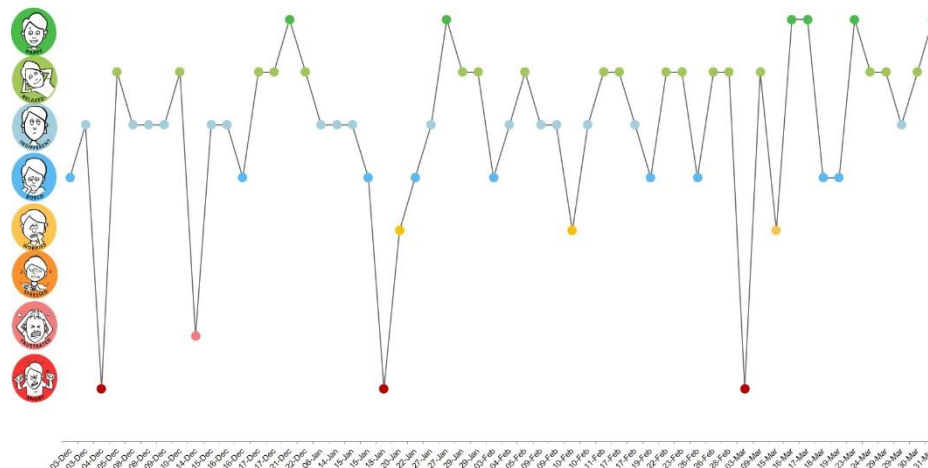


**'Chris'** aged 55-64, travels to/from Thornton Heath and London Victoria and is commuting for education. He uses an Oyster or contactless card.

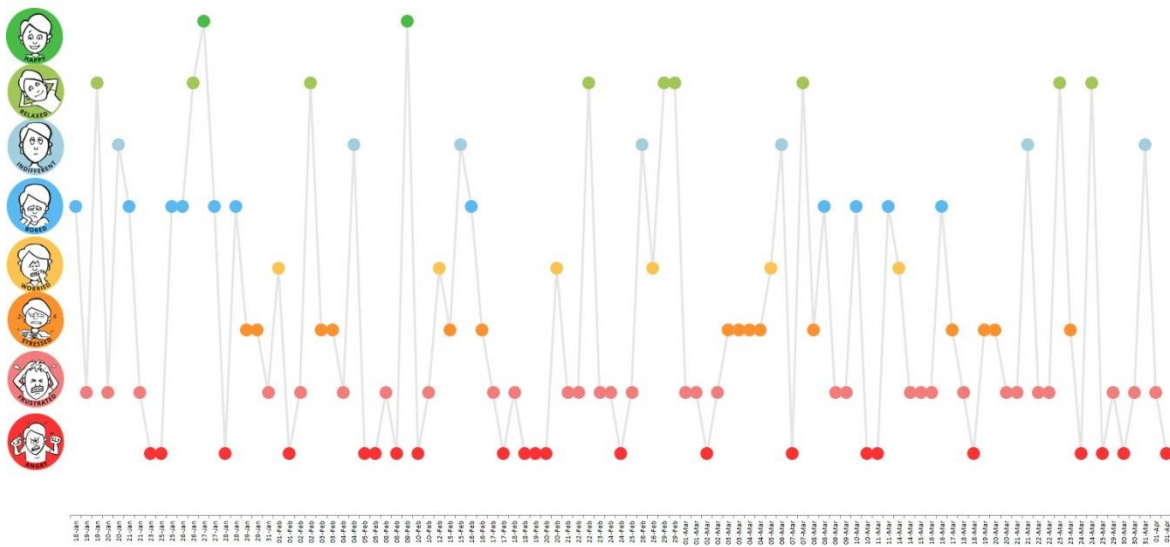


Taking a passenger's 'pulse' on a daily basis over a four-month period paints a very interesting picture. It shows that commuters are not one-dimensional or perpetually grumpy. It also gives a feel for the 'steady state' regular emotion experienced and highlights the frequency of 'bad days' which have a strong effect on perceptions.

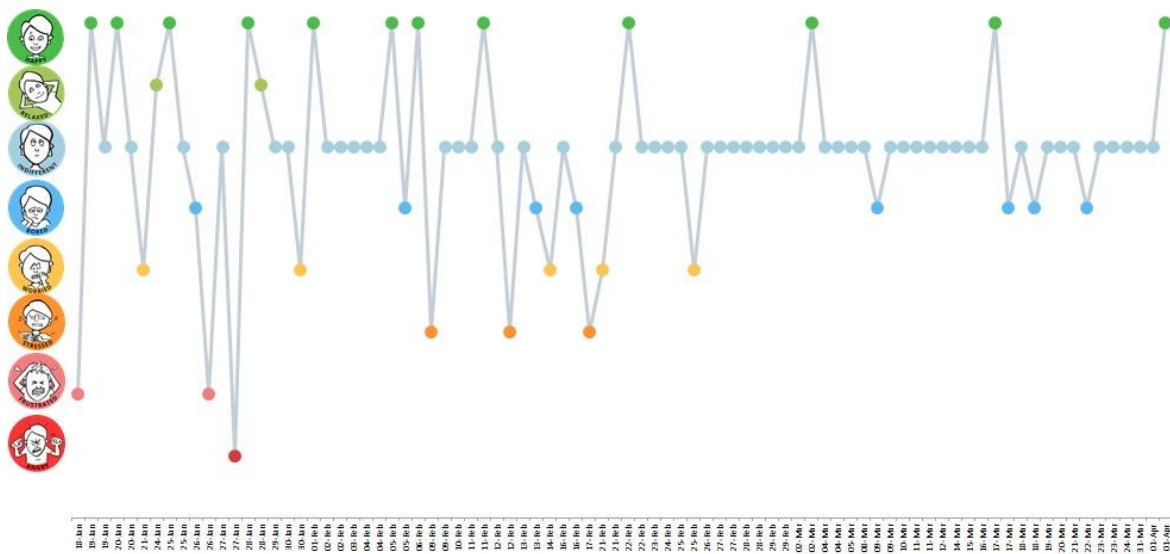
**Anna - sentiment over the four months**



## Beth - sentiment over the four months



## Chris - sentiment over the four months



## How the information was used

The feedback helped direct management attention to the areas where improvements were needed.

Previously we had experimented with using Twitter feeds as evidence of where improvements were needed<sup>7</sup>. We found that high Twitter volumes can be caused by a lack of information provided by staff at stations and on trains.

While the emotional tracker doesn't reflect the impact of the information in the same way, we saw that speedy replies to passenger tweets by operators result in real appreciation. Going further, negative experiences can be mitigated by a response and passengers build up better relationships and trust when the operator engages directly with them on Twitter.

As a result of this we held workshops on how to deliver better information with the train operators and Network Rail, picking out where passengers felt things had gone well or badly to emphasise the importance of good information.

In the run up to the engineering blockades and closure of London Bridge over the Christmas period, both Southeastern and GTR worked closely with Network Rail to ensure that passengers across the network knew journeys would be disrupted. In addition to extensive social media messaging there were significant efforts to ensure that posters at stations, customer information screens, announcements and local media outlets raised awareness of the works and their impact.

The relatively small number of negative comments on Twitter, coupled with praise for front line staff working at some of the affected stations would suggest that the communication campaign and implementation of the blockade were a success.

We continued pushing the importance of good information through the use of the tracker and comments submitted by passengers completing the survey. This highlighted the inconsistency of information on the various routes leading to the operators agreeing that improving information for customers is a key priority. Both operators set up work streams to address this.

### What does this mean?

The research underlines the importance of punctuality and capacity for commuters. In the longer-term, of course, the work at London Bridge is doing precisely that – it is designed to vastly increase capacity (both in terms of frequency and the number of carriages) and reliability. But there are still things that can be done in the shorter term.

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/social-media-monitoring-pilot-research-report/>

The research demonstrates the need for a punctuality measure that reflects passengers' experience (that is, 'right-time') rather than an industry measure like PPM which considers a train five minutes late to be 'on time'. The closer the train is to being right-time the happier the passenger is likely to be. There is a passenger dividend from focusing on right-time.

The ability to do something productive or enjoyable on the journey can help to take the edge off some of the more negative emotions. Typically this will mean provision of Wi-Fi and improving mobile phone signals – in the longer-term it could also mean the provision of power sockets on board trains. Providing free, reliable Wi-Fi on trains can, at the very least, mean that time spent standing on a train is not completely wasted.

It is much harder for the industry to target external influences – having a good or bad day at work isn't in the gift of the railway – but it can contribute. Getting people to work or meetings on time, giving them accurate information, providing Wi-Fi that allows them to get a head-start can all help create a good day. Operators should look to see how they can take advantage of the 'Friday feeling'.

Unsurprisingly though, improving performance and providing enough seats or room to stand is the best way to improve passenger sentiment. If it is likely that these London and South East routes will not meet expected performance targets for the foreseeable future, then the industry must consider how to start winning passenger confidence back.

Our trust work shows that they can look to do this via their relationship with passengers. And we think this requires three things:

- be open about delivery and the problems and the duration of these problems to help set revised expectations
- make some offer that shows passenger they haven't been forgotten and that acknowledges problems experienced – perhaps the Government's quick implementation of its welcome promise to cut the threshold for Delay Repay to 15 minutes from the current 30
- make sure there are less 'really bad' days – improve recovery when things start to go wrong.

This work has provided a benchmark of emotions. We recommend that it is run again in six months to a year's time, to measure any change. In the meantime NRPS will give a picture of passenger satisfaction.

We also recommend that it is implemented whenever there will be a period of disruption or significant change, as a way of monitoring in the moment how well things are being communicated to or delivered for passengers.



© 2016 Transport Focus



Transport Focus  
Fleetbank House  
2-6 Salisbury Square  
London  
EC4Y 8JX

0300 123 2350  
[www.transportfocus.org.uk](http://www.transportfocus.org.uk)  
[info@transportfocus.org.uk](mailto:info@transportfocus.org.uk)