
THE CUSTOMER PERSPECTIVE

Anthony Smith, CEO, Transport Focus

What do rail passengers want? 'On time and a seat please...'

As I stand waiting at Balham for a train to Victoria what do I want? The train should arrive on time at both Balham and Victoria. Though I might not stop to think about it, I want the trip to be safe. Frequent enough trains so that I do not need a timetable. Getting a seat would be nice, but at the least not to be so crushed that I cannot do anything. Finally, if there are delays I need timely and useful information.

In the longer term, it would be good if the prices didn't inexorably go up every year. This summarises the main hopes that most passengers have as they set off on their journeys. How, if at all, could digital developments help?

On one level, passengers probably do not

care if something is supplied digitally or any other way as long as it works. However, digital technology has the power to make a real difference to passengers' daily lives.

How do we know what rail passengers want?

The Transport Focus National Rail Passenger Survey is the world's largest published work on passenger satisfaction. An Official Statistic, it covers 20 weeks in each year and has been running for almost 20 years.

NRPS data is fresh, asking passengers about the journey they have completed. It is representative – every year more than 65,000 passengers take part. It is used to benchmark train companies and Network Rail, in franchise agreements, and is widely used by the industry.

Overall satisfaction with the journey was 81% nationally. We know the key factor driving satisfaction is performance. The factor driving the smaller number of dissatisfied passengers is how delays are dealt with, followed by performance.

Our work on trust between passengers and the rail industry reinforces this. We asked current passengers across Great Britain what was driving their trust – and unsurprisingly, the answer is performance.

When we tracked passenger emotions as another way of measuring satisfaction, it showed once again that performance is key. Satisfaction with performance dips dramatically as soon as trains start to be late, and passengers get irate after 30 minutes' delay.

So, a clear message for the industry. Get more trains on time and you will keep your current passengers happier. Delay fewer passengers and you will annoy less with your handling of delays. Anything that digital technology can do to improve the reliability of trains and help with disruption information will feed straight through into improved passenger satisfaction. It's the ability to get a seat that makes a commuter's ordinary journey OK or good – and is the difference between a good day and a bad one for longer-distance travellers.

The ability of digital technology to allow more trains to run on the network will also drive passenger satisfaction, trust and how they feel about the journey.

What are passengers' priorities for improvement?

As part of our contribution to the industry's longer-term planning we asked nearly 13,000 current passengers across Great Britain about their priorities for improvement.

Passengers' key priorities for improvement focus on more chance of getting a seat, more reliable trains, fewer unplanned disruptions and fewer cancellations. Less disruption due to engineering work and more frequent trains also feature. So, the ability of digital technology to make the railway network more robust and more frequent (better signalling should allow more trains to operate on the same track) will really meet passengers' priorities.

Value for money: digital driving down costs?

One other factor really stands out among passenger priorities: improving value for money. This is a complex issue. Value ratings vary enormously by ticket type used, journey purpose and by region.

Leisure passengers, often less-frequent users, tend to score value for money more highly than commuters. Advance purchase ticket-holders (who can get hold of some very good value for money fares) tend to be more satisfied than annual season ticket holders. Passengers in London and the South East tend to give lower ratings overall.

Passengers now pay a higher proportion of the running costs of the railway than ten years ago. The £9bn passengers pour into the industry

represents around 70% of the running costs. Fares regulation keeps a lid on the prices of some season tickets and off-peak returns, but years of above-inflation fare rises have driven many prices up.

While welcome Government investment is driving improvements in trains, track and stations, rising passenger numbers have outrun development in many places. The rail industry has struggled to deliver efficiencies and operational upgrades in a value for money fashion.

Passengers are willing to pay for a service as long as the basics are delivered – but the ability of digital railway to take the heat out of fare rises would be great. An announcement that fares will rise by less than inflation (measured by CPI not RPI please!), or indeed not at all, due to efficiency gains, would be a great gift.

What do future passengers want?

Our work with non or infrequent users underlines all of the above. Better value for money fares, more seats, more trains, more of which arrive on time with fewer disruptions and cancellations, will help passengers use trains more and attract non-users.

You say you want a digital revolution: that's fine by me!

The white heat of digital technology should produce improvements for rail passengers as it has in other transport sectors and different industries. Digital should make operations more efficient in terms of punctuality and cost. Digital should be more reliable. Digital should make people's jobs easier, giving access to better information. Digital should be more flexible for the future.

However, the passenger at Balham station will not want to know about digital for its own sake, but the things it will improve for them.

Also, don't forget that processes should support people not the other way around. Use digital technology to support better decisions, better service and better care but always remember that, in a crisis, human beings turn to other human beings for help and support.