



THE FUTURE OF PASSENGER TRANSPORT
Travel
2020 EVENT Speaker

EXPERT VIEW

Are we really listening enough to passengers?

Serious understanding of user behaviour and expectations must be at the core of planning and designing travel provision and introducing new ways of payment and service information says **Louise Amantani**

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Are we giving passengers real opportunities to comment on their travel experiences and help shape future provision?

Operators, infrastructure and technology suppliers, passenger representatives and a wide range of other stakeholders gathered at the Travel 2020 event to discuss how technology is driving change in the transport sector. Much of the discussion revolved around the importance of achieving a customer-focused approach by listening to passengers and putting their needs at the centre of future developments.

This revolutionary idea of listening to the customer might sound like a statement of the mind-blowingly obvious, but most rail commuters at least would argue that it is still not being taken seriously. It's exciting hearing a speech on how we might soon be able to swipe a bank card to pay for travel, or use an app to book a train and a taxi in one transaction, but if my train doesn't run on time and I'm left wondering when it is coming, that taxi booking is pretty useless!

Operators need to get the basics of communication right first – first and foremost passengers want to be kept informed. I am much more forgiving of a train that is “running 10 minutes late” than a train that is simply “delayed” because at least I can then adapt my plans.

This need for information, important for all passengers, is absolutely crucial for some user groups, such as those who are disabled. These passengers may have generally experienced a loss of confidence, and when a journey has been meticulously planned to work around staff and facility availability, being told no more than “This bus is on diversion” can create a level of uncertainty sufficient to deter a repeat journey.

Thanks to social media, talking to passengers is easier now than ever before, and can be done with far greater immediacy. Many operators are now joining Facebook and Twitter in the realisation that if your customers are going to talk about you anyway, you should at least attempt to join the conversation. However, there is a serious risk of running before you can walk. Twitter communication is geared far more towards broadcasting a message than holding a conversation – it's great for informing passengers about a major delay, not so great for thrashing out a customer

service dispute. If passengers expect a Twitter account to be manned whenever the trains are running, starting a conversation that you are unable to finish in real-time is probably worse than not starting one at all.

Likewise, there is little doubt that new technology in the field of fare and ticketing will make travel by public transport easier, more efficient and more attractive for a considerable proportion of the population. However, we should recognise that these mobile technologies are at the same time pushing passenger expectations higher and higher. The modern consumer wants a fast and responsive service, 24/7, and services that are tailored to each individual's needs: it's the difference between once having to walk down to a corner shop before noon on a Saturday because that's when would close, and now, ordering from a much vaster array of goods on eBay at 3am on a Sunday. Modern passengers however seem to prefer minimal interaction with the operator: we buy online, we swipe a smart card, we take out the iPhone and block out passenger announcements with music. This increasingly distant relationship creates more room for misunderstandings and less room for building trust.

Usually, the only time an operator gets to interact with the passenger is when something goes wrong. But if we still can't get an immediate response to “what is happening with my specific train”, we are far more likely to use Twitter to moan to other passengers than to the operator. The modern hotel customer no longer writes to the owner directly, she posts a one-star buyer review to warn other potential buyers. So if operators think that they can simply jump straight into social media and turn their passengers into friends through a direct conversation, they are very much mistaken. Social media users only connect with another user when they already have positive feelings for them offline – this trust needs to be already in place for the conversation to even begin. There's a vital paradox at the heart of modern customer-supplier interaction: operators will only earn their passengers' trust by already knowing what they want without asking them – in other words, by listening to what passengers

say about the operator behind its back.

Likewise, keeping up with the latest technology options is fine, but this will not deliver any understanding of what passengers, and particularly prospective passengers, want from a future fares and ticketing system. For example, are they more inclined to opt for contactless bank cards or mobile technology? Or do they simply want to be able to get paper tickets more easily? What's happening to cash in all this? What are the concerns of the unbanked or people without access to a smartphone? Are their needs being met in this debate?

That said, some operators are certainly engaging with the passenger perspective. At Travel 2020, we heard Thomas Ableman of Chiltern Railways explain how their top priority was "giving customers their time back". They couldn't compete with other operators in giving the fastest service, but they could invest in on-board plugs and wifi that would turn dead time into useful time for passengers. They were also the first to develop a mobile ticketing app that cut down booking time and exploited simplified fare structures to offer passengers more flexibility in which trains they took. Coincidentally, Chiltern have recently posted an increase in revenue of 25%.

David Brown of Go-Ahead also explained how market research enabled them to "think like a passenger" and develop innovative services that were built to answer specific passenger needs. One example was a ticketing app which creates a hologram on a smart phone that you can show directly to the driver. However, Go-Ahead are not simply dazzled by the latest technology: at the same time, David Brown, Chief Executive, emphasised how the first thing to look for when recruiting a bus

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driver is customer service skills. You can teach someone how to operate a vehicle or machine: it's much harder to transform someone into a "people-person".

The complaints that come direct to an operator's customer service or Twitter account are only ever going to tell one small part of the story. Many passengers won't tell operators what they're thinking - either because they are happy, because they are cynical that it's worth their time or effort, or simply because like most people, they are more forthright when they can express their opinion anonymously. Operators need to get somebody else to ask passengers what they think of the operator and what they want from them - and this is where market research plays such a vital role. Traditional methods such as tick-box surveys and focus groups still play a major role, but it is important to analyse the deeper feelings or circumstances that have led somebody to tick a box. By asking the right questions that are tailored to an operator's particular strategic objectives, it becomes possible to create actionable research full of concrete recommendations and thereby deliver grass-roots improvements that are visible to passengers.

My company holds online focus groups on a monthly basis for one operator, tapping into hot topics such as ticketing issues or disruptions due to bad weather. This on-going approach enables us to understand

the background informing current passenger opinions - why, for example, certain refurbishments at a specific station might have answered a need that had been voiced a year earlier, compared to others that are perceived as merely window-dressing. Conducting groups online enables us to listen to harder-to-reach passengers: those who live in geographically remote areas, those who have mobility issues or those who may simply be intimidated by the prospect of a face to face group (but who might nevertheless be less afraid to complain on the internet, either with or without us!).

Real-time technology can be exploited for gathering information from passengers as well as giving it to them. We've developed a website called e-luminate where passengers can fill in an online survey from a smartphone during or immediately after their journey, capturing spontaneous reactions and fresh memories. This tool also enables us to communicate with passengers in a variety of ways - we can show them photos or diagrams of how a future offering might work, and they can upload words, pictures or videos as their own responses. Sometimes a picture of passengers crushed in a doorway while the aisle is clear and empty speaks a thousand words about an unpleasant journey! At other times, the camera angles available when you're squished up like a sardine might not be very illuminating, but when a rail commuter recently used a stock image of sardines and another of Indian passengers swarming all over the roof and walls of a train, we could feel his frustration much better than if he'd used a real-world image. Our forum facility also enables passengers to interact and share their opinions and experiences, showing us immediately which ones resonate across a whole group.

In summary, it's a great and welcome advance that operators are now mobilising real-time information and social media like Twitter to talk to their passengers. But talking at them is no good: operators need to create channels through which passengers can talk back to them and listen to what they say. They need to get objective third parties, such as researchers, to talk to their passengers, and to work with researchers to develop the right questions that will help inform their long-term strategy. The great technological developments we are currently witnessing must be used to create a two-way, multimedia dialogue. It's not only the key to very valuable business information; it's what customers expect. ■

