Disruption:
How to improve
the passenger
experience

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During the winter months, thousands of people use public transport. But are transport providers up to the challenge of getting people home in time for Christmas?

"When we talk about disruption in the transport industry, we are not just talking about trains being delayed or cancelled. We are also talking about a lack of information, a sudden change in a journey plan or a missed connection. This could be due to adverse weather, unprecedented customer uplift or human error – all of which can contribute to a decline in passenger satisfaction.

Disruption is particularly prevalent in the Christmas season. During this time, the amount of travellers increases as people travel home, or away, for the festivities. Combine this with unpredictable British weather and many TOCs, bus companies and airlines struggle to meet the demand and recover in the event of disruption.

Whilst we can't always predict such events, we can consider how we can best help passengers when things don't go to plan. If you can manage disruption effectively during the holidays, when people will place most sentiment in being able to reach their destination on time, you may be able to secure not just a ticket sale, but a loyal and returning passenger for the rest of the year."

John Acton, Managing Partner, Passenger Services

'tis the season of disruption

British weather can be volatile at the best of times but more so in winter when roads, railway tracks and runways are all subject to damage from gale force winds, heavy rain, snow and ice.

In a weather review from December 2013 to January 2014 the Met Office reported that:

- The storm on the 5th December saw Scotland's rail network shut down, 100,000 homes were without power and there were flight cancellations at Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen.

- The storm of 23rd to 24th December caused widespread flooding across southern England, stretching through Dorset, Hampshire, Surrey and Kent, and extensive power cuts. In Devon, there was transport disruption and rail services were cancelled due to fallen trees. Gatwick Airport was also affected by flooding.

During this jolly season, flights, trains and ferries all suffered severe delays. Many train companies cancelled services and imposed reduced schedules. Speed restrictions on the lines due to the strong winds also brought further disruption with Virgin Trains cancelling 40 journeys and Greater Anglia cancelling 50.[1]

On Christmas Eve 2013, airports in the south of the country were severely disrupted, with Gatwick being one of the worst hit. The basement of the North Terminal was flooded and in turn caused some electrical systems to fail, affecting over 11,000 passengers with 72 of 260 flights being cancelled. Passengers complained about infrequent and conflicting updates on the situation, a lack of clarity on who was in charge and confusion on what passengers could be reimbursed for. Plans should be in place to deal with these problems before an event arises. Whether in an airport, at a train station or on a ferry the main priority should be the passenger experience and all employees should be aware of the process, from the barista in the coffee shop to the terminal manager.

> "Had Gatwick airport or Easyjet implemented any kind of contingency plan or had the honesty to inform passengers around midday that flights from the North terminal would not leave, thousands of unfortunates might have been able to make alternative arrangements, but no, they were unprofessional in the extreme and simply abandoned passengers to their fate."
>
> House of Commons Transport Committee, 'Putting passengers first: disruption at Gatwick, Christmas Eve 2013'

[1] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/weather/10535835/
Christmas-travel-in-UK-disrupted-by-storms-and-flooding.html?mobile=basic

Billy Dunne @BillyDunne - Dec 24

Travelled for 24 hours to get home after landing at Manchester instead of Gatwick. So glad I didn't travel DifficultJet. Could you imagine?

Tim Fargo @alphabetsuccess - Dec 24

@lufthansa Having travel delays in heathrow. Compounded needlessly by NO communication by staff. People confused at checkin. Help please.

The rail industry did not go unaffected during this time. With various storms affecting the whole country especially Scotland's railway which was temporarily shut down due to the storm on the 5th of Dec, causing complete travel chaos.[2]

On the 23rd and 24th of December, the UK was hit by its third storm of the month, this time, on two of the busiest days for travel. On the 24th, just before the afternoon rush hour, there were more than 20 rail lines blocked as trees were blown onto tracks. Most rail companies abandoned their timetables in an effort simply to get people to their destinations.[3]

"We're not interested in punctuality at the moment; we're just interested in getting everybody where they want to be by tomorrow night."

24th December, 2013
Robin Gisby, Network Rail

East Coast Trains @eastcoastuk - Dec 23

Severe weather has been forecast for today and tomorrow. Ticket restrictions are lifted. Please travel earlier in the day if you can.

[2] http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/climate/uk/interesting/2013-decwind

[3] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2528357/Storms-south-snow-north-Chaos-road-rail-millions-scramble-beat-weather-great-Christmas-getaway.html#ixzz3HYPXqglT

By lifting travel restrictions, train operators were doing everything they could to make sure passengers could reach their destinations. However, this still left many passengers unhappy.

Mark Chalcraft @markchalcraft- Dec 23

Leaving work slightly early has not really helped. Now stuck on a train at Goring. Instead of being stuck at a train in Durrington.

Peter Bradshaw @PeterBradshaw1 - 1h

We are stuck on a non-moving train in Ipswich. People are doing little half-smiled and eye-rolling gestures at each other

Francesca Vivienne @francescavl - 1hr

@fgw stuck on a train somewhere in wiltshire. hasnt moved for over an hour. no word as to whats happening. At least us update passengers!

ChelmoHammer @ChelmoHammer - 1hr

I wouldn't even bother going out tonight if I were you. Been stuck on m25 for 2 hours anti-clockwise towards the Tunnel #M25

The National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) provides a network-wide picture of customer satisfaction when travelling by rail. Over 60,000 rail passengers gave their views about their journeys in the last year. In order to improve passenger satisfaction it is important to understand what upsets customers in the first place and what the consequences are.

What has the biggest impact on overall satisfaction?
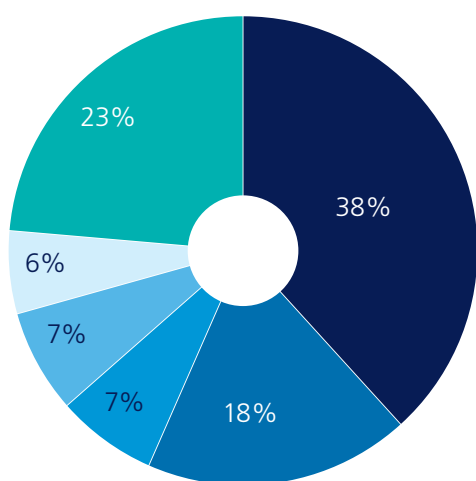
- Punctuality/reliability
- Cleanliness inside train
- Ease of getting on/off train
- Journey Length (speed)
- Frequency of trains on route
- Others

What has the biggest impact on overall dissatisfaction?
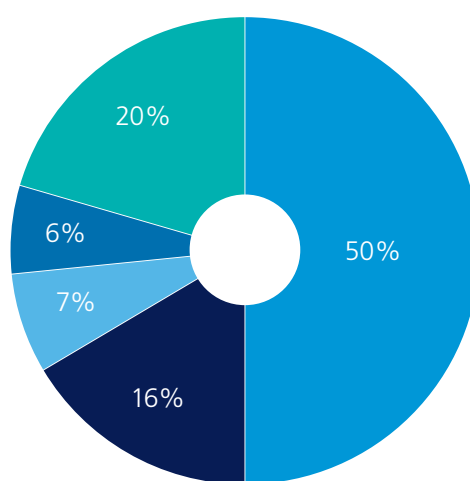
- How train company dealt with delays
- Punctuality/reliability
- Journey Length (speed)
- Sufficient room for all to sit/stand
- Others

The showings from the NRPS show that punctuality remains the biggest single influence on satisfaction and that how delays are handled by TOC's has the biggest influence on dissatisfaction.[4]

Although customers could simply choose to travel using alternative methods, it is important to move them away from this train of thought by tackling congestion and getting customers to invest in the travel industry. Businesses need to win customer loyalty by improving the passenger experience during periods of disruption and ultimately create advocates of public transport.

Evidently no one is able to prevent bad weather, but there are options available to you when things don't go to plan which will help give passengers the reassurance and advice they need until services can be restored.

In the case of air travel, since the flood at Gatwick on the 24th Dec 2013, The Civil Aviation Authority now has the role of overseeing operational resilience at Heathrow and Gatwick. A Passenger Champion scheme has been implemented where each terminal has an individual whose sole responsibility, during periods of disruption, is to ensure passenger welfare concerns are met.

Across all modes of transport, O$_2$ believes technology has a key role in helping address the challenge of keeping passengers informed during periods of disruption.

Digitally Enabled

Giving passengers the information they need to make an informed decision is key to managing their expectations and getting them on their way as soon as possible. Equipping employees with tablets and smartphones means real-time data can be securely accessed from anywhere. Employees will be able to look up the latest information on a journey and offer advice on how long the disruption is expected to last. Or, give passengers the opportunity to check for updates themselves by providing access to interactive screens or the opportunity to download an app to self-serve via their own device. Ensure all information sources provide real-time data which comes direct from the same back office systems, to avoid the passenger frustration caused when they receive a conflicting message. It may be simple but the reassurance it can give your customers is priceless.

Managing Big Data

Not only does improving employee connectivity create a more memorable experience for the customer, their interaction with your staff over connected devices also provides actionable insight. This can be used to help you understand customer behaviours and improve profiling, as well as identify further training areas for your staff. O$_2$ can also help you prepare your business accordingly in relation to demand by offering a people counter solution to track the changes in passenger footfall during each season. In addition, Smart Steps is helping transport operators understand their passengers by providing information such as frequency of travel, travel origin and popular destinations.

Connectivity

For all this to work seamlessly, devices must be underpinned by connectivity. Whether that's 3G, 4G or O$_2$ Wifi, we have a wealth of connectivity options that can support your employees. But there are benefits for passengers too. Offering public access Wifi will connect them with family and friends in the event of any delay, or keep them entertained by streaming movies or browsing the web. By 2017 we'll have invested over £3 billion in upgrading our network to cover 98% of the UK population and will have the largest data network in the UK.
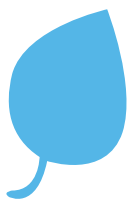
Engagement

During the booking process, give passengers the option to input a mobile phone number. Travel companies could offer an opt-in SMS service that delivers real-time updates on a journey straight to the customer's phone. Or you could offer a coffee coupon by way of an apology in the event of any disruption. This simple service could have a huge impact on customer satisfaction.

Managed Mobility

Let's not forget that some of your employees will be passengers too. What if they can't reach the office? While flexible working won't clear blocked roads or repair damaged tracks, it can offer an alternative. This is where Managed Mobility comes in which gives your employees access to all the connectivity, digital tools, data and even the custom apps they need to work remotely.

Get in touch

There are a range of digital services that can help keep your employees and passengers connected which have a direct impact on satisfaction scores. During periods of disruption, it is essential that you ensure passengers have access to the advice they need to make an informed decision and technology is at the heart of this.

With more than 23 million mobile customers in the UK, over 450 retail stores and through our work with companies such as TfL, Network Rail and CityFleet we have obtained valuable customer insight. Although disruption is unavoidable, O$_2$ can make it manageable.

To find out more about our work in the Passenger Services industry, go to: o2.co.uk/passengerservices

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