

The recent line-up of four trains just north of York was broadcast live to the world through social media. VTEC.



Social media: the genie's out of the bottle, so use it

There is a lot the railway industry can do to better promote itself to today's travellers and engage on issues that matter to them - by smart use of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, says **TOM INGALL**

On Sunday April 9 2017 a passenger boarded a United Express Airlines flight in Chicago. Forty-eight hours later hundreds of millions of dollars had been lost from the stock market value of its parent company (see graph, page 57), though it later recovered. What happened in between is a cautionary tale for any organisation in this new age of social media.

Anyone with a smartphone in their pocket has the tools to be a multimedia journalist. More importantly, they also have the power of a publisher. The story of how Dr David Dao was removed from the overbooked flight 3411 from Chicago to Louisville might not have been told at all ten years ago. Without the pictures to support either his or his fellow passengers' account of what happened, newsrooms might well have ignored it.

Social media - internet applications with user-generated content - strips away nuance and bypasses the traditional editorial chain. The pictures of a man with a bloodied face were quickly passed from reader to reader via the likes of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube, and soon United was at the centre of a viral storm, with traditional news outlets following afterwards.

In its opening statement, the company said using security guards to remove people from the aircraft when there were no volunteers to give up their seats was an effort to "re-accommodate" passengers. This too was circulated widely on social media, prompting a second surge in unwelcome attention and a second apology, this time the UAE's chief executive saying that what had happened was "truly horrific".

By now the airline's share values were falling sharply. In its official review into what happened, United concluded: "We can never apologise enough for what occurred and for our initial response that followed." It has since settled with the passenger.

Share values can recover, but reputations often take longer. It's tempting to disregard social media as a passing fad, but many platforms have been around for approaching a decade and are becoming embedded into societal habits. It's legitimate to feel that networking such as sites aren't something for you personally, but understanding their power is essential - not only in case the railway's own flight 3411 moment should come, but also to help it flourish.

Carmel O'Toole is a senior lecturer in public relations at Sheffield Hallam University, and has spent many years working in the

communications industry.

"Facebook began to take hold in 2005, and the seminal moment for Twitter for me was the plane crash in the Hudson River in 2009," she says. "I think that's when we saw the first Twitter picture circulated globally - you had the iconic image of people standing on the plane wings waiting to be rescued."

She believes there are many positives about social media, the major upside being that it allows you to speak instantly and globally to targeted audiences.

"In a commercial setting companies can do their research. They can look at what their customers are talking about. It's a valuable insight for free into what customers are saying. That helps companies target exactly what they do, when they do it and how they provide it."

But she warns that it is a two-way thing - a dialogue that can go either way. "As big companies will know, people are very ready to tell them when they are not happy about something. The era of global reputational risk is upon us," she says.

With so many platforms each at different stages of maturity, O'Toole believes it is also essential to choose which one is the right fit for your company, particularly when you have limited resources to deploy.

"Things change so quickly. Bands like the Arctic Monkeys started on MySpace. Who remembers that? It is consigned to history in terms of online tools," she says.

"You have to monitor the fortunes of these sites. Twitter - there is debate about whether it has peaked. Facebook is now much more middle-aged in terms of use. Your 18 to 25-year-olds are more likely to use Instagram and Snapchat. Social media users are fickle. They go where the wind blows, where it looks more interesting, more functional, more attuned to their age group. Companies have to understand the pleasures and the pitfalls and put resources into managing them, keeping that feed vital."

Even though MPs have criticised social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter for not policing and removing extremist or racist content, there appears to be no slowdown in take-up.

In early May, Facebook said it now had close to two billion users - with almost one-and-a-half billion using it every day. In other words, a quarter of the planet is signed up. It allows users to post images, videos and text of things that are important to them, >

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Carmel O'Toole, Senior Lecturer in Public Relations, Sheffield Hallam University



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Andrea Burris, User Researcher, Transport Systems Catapult

> and invites others to share in them. Twitter, where brevity is soul, limits users to updates posted to the world in 140 characters or fewer. It claims to have 313 million active users.

The rail industry certainly numbers among them. Network Rail is active on both platforms, informing passengers where delays are occurring and when they are resolved. British Transport Police shares safety messages and appeals for information in connection with unresolved crime. Train operating companies promote offers, give real-time journey information, and retweet positive passenger experiences.

Virgin has a separate team managing feeds on its West Coast and East Coast franchises. Richard Shilton is the head of social media for Virgin West Coast.

“We’re in a digital age and people expect things instantaneously - this is what we’re trying to provide,” he says.

“Social media allows us to reach customers, and potential future customers, in a way we’ve never been able to before. This includes communication like new advertising, promotions, special offers, new partnerships, crisis communication like disruption messaging, ticket restrictions, and how to claim compensation. I think the days of calling a brand to see what’s happening have gone - now it’s all about real-time activity and what’s happening in the moment.”

Some 136,000 people follow the Virgin Trains East Coast Twitter account. Its social media manager is Nick Wood: “The main [social media] platforms we use are Twitter and Facebook, but we also have a presence on LinkedIn. We use YouTube, Pinterest and Instagram to a lesser extent.

“There are platforms like Snapchat that have a young audience. If we want to innovate we should be looking at that more and



Carmel O’Toole, from Sheffield Hallam University, says that for her, the seminal moment for Twitter was the plane crash in the Hudson River in 2009. This iconic image of people standing on the wings waiting to be rescued was shared widely on social media. US Airways Flight 1549 had struck a flock of Canada geese and consequently lost all engine power. Unable to reach an airport, the pilots glided the aircraft to the Hudson River, allowing all 155 people aboard to be rescued by nearby boats. JANIS KRUM.

challenging the fact that our current audience doesn’t match that profile - why not target a younger audience? The big thing at Virgin is to be ahead of the game.”

It can, of course, be a double-edged sword. There’s instant gratification if you’ve run a successful campaign. But on the flipside, if you have disruption or the website is down, then you’re going to get a huge volume of people coming to you - none too happy.

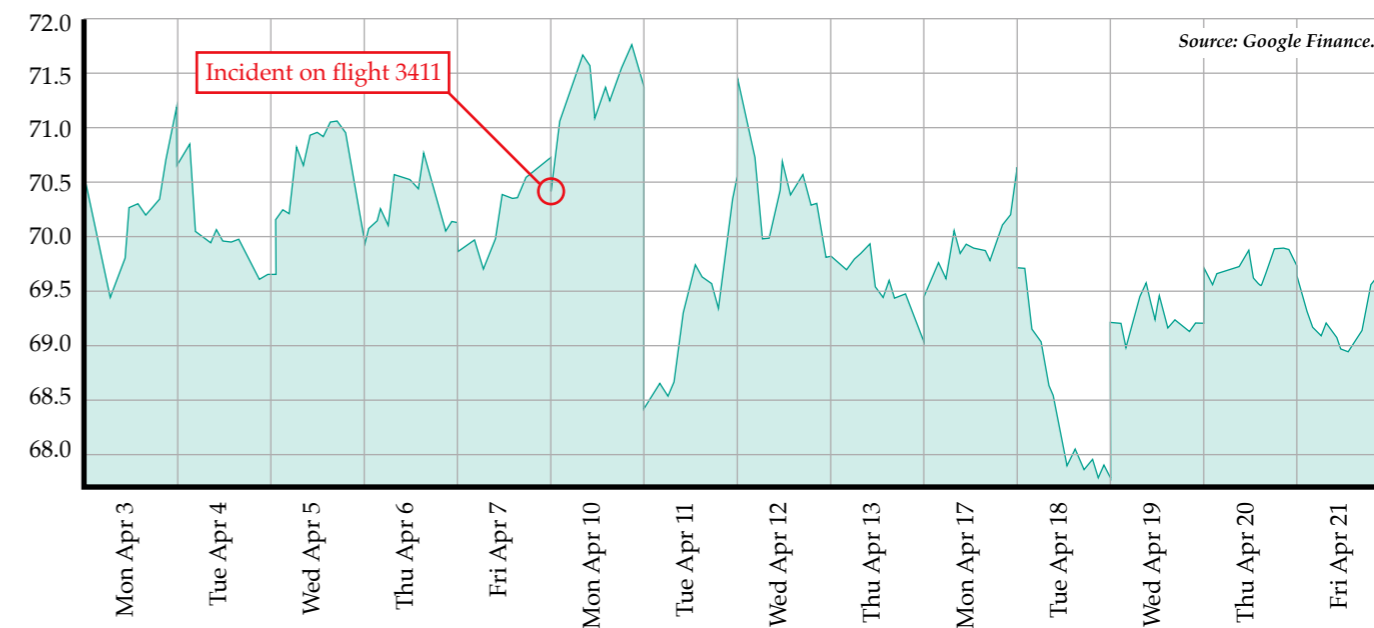
“It is challenging meeting expectations, and keeping the information accurate and updated as often as possible,” Wood adds. “You’ll always have a certain amount of firefighting because people turn to their smartphones when they are on the move. They could be on a train with just a ten-minute delay and get annoyed. In the past, people perhaps wouldn’t have gone home and thought about writing a letter to say ‘I was delayed for ten minutes’, so there is a culture shift.”

Adjusting to the changing channels of communication has also meant finding the appropriate tone and language to use. Wood encourages his team to strip away corporate speak when posting on social media, and to let their personalities come through.

There has also been the chance to innovate. The line-up of four trains just north of York in April 2017 was broadcast live to the world through social media. At Christmas, a Facebook Live stream (essentially a live video feed with which people can interact) featured East Coast and West Coast social media teams joining up for an event hosted first at King’s Cross and then Birmingham New Street. People were invited down to the respective stations for the chance to win prizes.

More famously, when *Flying Scotsman* returned to the East Coast Main Line in February 2016, an enthusiast’s long-awaited snap

United Continental Holdings Inc (parent company of United Airlines) share price change



was “photobombed” (the term of the moment for an unexpected or unwanted intrusion into a photograph) by a Virgin train that simultaneously passed and blocked the view. Following a tweet from the photographer, the company responded by offering him a flight to America.

“No amount of planning can prepare you for that,” admits Wood. “It was reactive and good fun. As I left the office, on the TV in reception Richard Branson was being asked about it. It was picked up by websites and national publications. It was gold - a good example of the value of being in the moment and part of a bigger group.”

Employees can also play a part in corporate promotion through their own Twitter accounts. Between St Pancras and Sheffield, Train Manager Matt Dawson engages directly with East Midlands Trains passengers on Twitter. During his on-train announcements he encourages them to share where they are travelling and why.

Even if the industry were ignoring these new forms of communication, its passengers aren’t. As Virgin’s Nick Wood says, it’s easy to pick up a device and give vent to frustration. And when that isn’t enough, social media has become a way to organise and campaign.

The Association of British Commuters (ABC) began as an online community, quickly evolving into a pressure group and support network. Now, with a grant from the Foundation for Integrated Transport, it has become a non-profit company - all in the space of a year.

ABC’s website outlines its campaign aims. It wants to promote a safe, affordable, accessible and reliable transport system across the UK, and ensure the commuter’s voice is heard in the national press



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Nick Wood, Head of Social Media, Virgin Trains East Coast

and Parliament.

Its roots are in the South, and as its lifespan broadly coincides with the continuing dispute between Southern Rail and the RMT over the introduction of Driver Only Operation, it is tempting to imagine it is a reaction to it. But ABC campaigner Emily Yates says the issues run deeper than that.

“It was never about the strike, but the strike became a big issue,” she says. “Back in April was the first station protest in Brighton. Travel was getting really bad around here. Before that was a group >



The Association of British Commuters began as an online community, quickly evolving into a pressure group and support network. Commuters vent their frustration during a protest at London Victoria station on December 15 2016. ALAMY.

► of local journalists and commuters getting together and saying ‘what is going on?’ No one was investigating why our train service was so bad, so we decided to do that and then asked questions. This led to a Facebook group which got very big very quickly.”

Stressing its desire to remain apolitical, ABC has tried to keep the issue of accessibility in the spotlight. It feels the issue of passengers who need assistance at stations to board or alight from trains is being lost in the noise of the ongoing industrial dispute.

“A lot of our members have been left behind on platforms,” says Yates. “Although we are a social media community we know each other face to face. The problems have brought us together. A person in a wheelchair is just as much a commuter if they use the train to get to work and for their social life.

“Social media has been such a useful tool. Everyone is commuting, so people have time to be on social media together. We are a very

ABC Passenger Survey Results 2016 Q34: How has the poor service impacted on your work life?

Answered: 868 Skipped: 231



“We’re in a digital age and people expect things instantaneously. Social media allows us to reach customers, and potential future customers, in a way we’ve never been able to before.”

Richard Shilton, Head of Social Media, Virgin West Coast

disparate group of people brought together by our feelings and interests. However, what we did was responsive - it was an act of surfing a wave of real-life public opinion, and we added our own research and investigative skills to that.

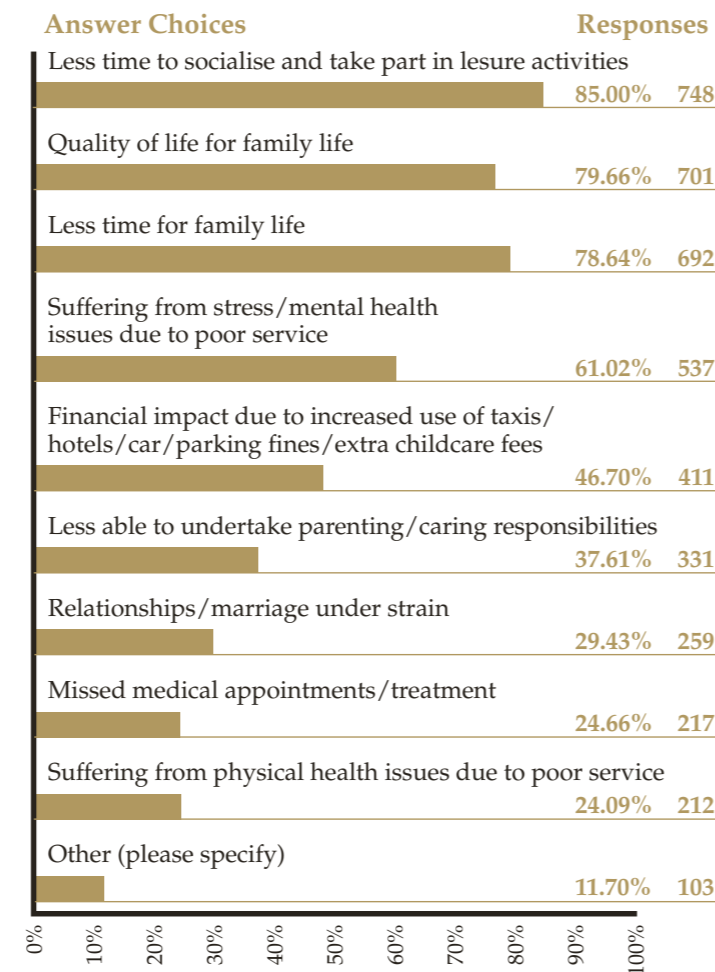
“It has to have the face-to-face element, too. A lot of people have met through events and protests, and that strengthens the online community. It needs both. Social media is not a substitute.”

As a young organisation, ABC has grown up using the tools available, rather than having to learn to integrate it into established communications processes. The result is a very nimble use of platforms. Physical protests that the group has organised have been shown live using Periscope, another application that allows the user to turn their phone into a live television camera. This means people who can’t be there in person can lend their support online.

By asking supporters to sign up to a ‘thunderclap’, they can share a single message across dozens of Twitter accounts simultaneously, amplifying their voice. Attach a ‘hashtag’ to a tweet and you have a beacon - a catchy slogan that can be searched for by people who

Q35: How has the poor service impacted on your well-being and personal life?

Answered: 880 Skipped: 219



Source: ABC Passenger Survey Results 2016.

are interested in the subject. ABC is associated with the hashtag #southernfail.

The ABC-organised passenger survey in late 2016 suggested a high number of respondents suffered with stress and anxiety through the difficulty of commuting.

“People have been really messed up by this,” says Yates. “The jokes and parodies have been a consolation and given us purpose. Horrible circumstance affected everyone’s lives and you needed to let off steam. As a community, we said let’s get together and help people through this.”

ABC is now seeking a Judicial Review of franchising and accessibility to the railways. Again, it has marshalled its immediate community in a modern way, with a crowd-funding campaign that has raised £26,000.

While the long-term impacts of social media are not yet clear, there is now more data available to be harvested about our daily lives. On one level, many of us will experience targeted advertising when we shop or even simply browse online.

Research institute Transport Systems Catapult in Milton Keynes has developed a series of tools which can analyse our digital lives and use the information to potentially smooth a journey. As TSC’s user researcher Andrea Burris explains: “We’ve developed three demonstrators. They all use information from social media, specifically Twitter, in different ways.”

The first of these is a customer-facing tool - a rail journey health check. It’s a journey time app with added information about past customer sentiment for specific trains. It can give you a rating for a particular train service, whether the sentiment was positive, neutral or negative.

It also gives information about performance of a particular service, the average delay, and how many times it had reached its final destination so that users can get an idea of the reliability of the service. The idea behind it was to give the customer more information about different journey options, so they could make a more informed decision.

The second initiative is a business intelligence tool. It visualises sentiment for the UK rail network. You can search for different companies in the UK and see not only how well their trains are currently running, but also the customer sentiment experienced on that service. It also uses information from the last 30 days, to give you more detail about performance.

The third TSC tool was aimed at the franchisee, and actually provides both train and station sentiment. It filters the sentiment coming through from Twitter into different categories - customer experience indicators. It could be ticketing, parking or cleanliness.

“It would come through to the station staff tablets, and they would be able to see if there were any issues in real time and they would be able to action them to improve the service,” says Burris. “This one could be a really good tool for train operators because it allows them to improve the real-time customer experience.”

All three of the applications are at proof of concept stage, so will require further funding and development before continuing their own journey towards smart phones. It also requires people to continue posting to Twitter and talking about their travel. Burris believes the concept is sound, even if the way the data is gathered



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Emily Yates, Campaigner, Association of British Commuters



Train manager Matt Dawson engages directly with EMT passengers on Twitter. During his on-train announcements he encourages them to share where they are travelling and why. TOM INGALL.

changes as social media sites wax and wane.

“The Twitter data that came through was tied to the location, which is how we could harness the sentiment to the journeys. If we used richer data from other social media sites such as Facebook, it would give us a more robust picture of how people are currently feeling - but also, we discussed if this was something openly known.

“Would people tweet more and feed back more about their journeys? Or do we keep it happening in the background? In the future, there might be an easier way of capturing sentiment. The premise of getting information to improve customer experience in a real-time context will continue to move forward, but the way we gather the data might change.”

Nick Wood at Virgin Trains East Coast is also looking to the future of social media to develop and generate business: “No doubt other platforms will come along. It’s about trying to make sure we are on top of what people expect - then do something a little bit different and push ourselves. I compare it to when email arrived. People were probably cynical and said they would stick to using fax machines and writing letters. The same thing applies with social media.”

He says Virgin has found there is still a need to educate people within the business, as well as customers, about the use of social media, why it is useful, and why it is not a “horrible beast” set to trip people up.

“In future, we can build up a profile of people contacting us via social media and realise who the high value customers are,” he says. “We can pre-empt people who have regular needs. It gives us the opportunity to predict those needs and surprise and delight them.”

Some of the tools to do this will already be at the fingertips of those running social media channels, according to Sheffield Hallam University’s Carmel O’Toole.

“From a PR practitioner’s point of view, if we are doing it, we should be able to measure the impact of it. It is not enough to have a chat on Twitter or Facebook,” she says.

“If companies are spending money on PR they want to know what they are getting. These tools are increasingly sophisticated. You learn to pick through those that are on offer, and it is increasingly possible to get rich valuable insight into what customers want to hear and when and how they want to hear it.”

As United Airlines found, stories can unfold much more rapidly than they used to. Gone are the days when statements could be chewed over at length. Reputations can be made and lost in hours. In skilled hands - and from both sides of the table - social media is rewriting the story of our lives. ■



Stephen Joseph
Chief Executive,
Campaign for Better Transport

Tom Ingall has accurately captured the increasing importance of social media in the transport world. He wrote it before the British Airways computer systems meltdown, where social media amplified the problems faced by thousands of stranded passengers. As Tom says, problems like that can damage brands and companies hugely, sometimes for years.

I think there are three areas which Tom is underplaying. First, the railway is still playing catch-up in technology terms. Too often, when there is disruption on the railways, passengers are better informed than staff on trains or at stations. Giving staff iPads, and the feeds to those with some clear messages, is done by some operators but not all. Having good responses on Twitter and Facebook, and using these channels proactively, is vital.

Second, social media can help improve the railway. Stakeholder engagement by operators still tends to be based on meetings and discussion with rail users, with online communication as an add-on. This is also true for consultation on franchise specifications and improvements by the DfT and others. Social media can radically improve this by getting new ideas and allowing an interactive exchange between the railway and the users and communities it serves.

But it doesn't stop there. Social media can tap into the skills of frustrated rail users and use them to come up with improvements. A good example is when someone on ABC's network pointed out that the ticket machines at Haywards Heath were difficult to use, and that the best-value fares were only available on the third or fourth screen down. Since this frustrated traveller designs user interfaces for computers for a living, he went on to explain exactly how the ticket machines could be reconfigured to make them more usable and to give people easier access to the best-value fare, and I think ended up explaining this to the RDG. This kind of interaction helps improve the railway for everyone.

The third issue is trust. And this is not just about the big events, it's about the day-to-day experience of using the railway. Transport Focus did some work on this a few years ago (www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/passengers-relationship-with-the-rail-industry/) and found that the headline National Rail Passenger Survey scores significant levels of distrust of individual train operators. As Tom says, if you can measure sentiment in real time using social media - in addition to those he quotes, sites such as CommuteLondon (commutelondon.com/resources/TwitterTrainsOfThought2015.pdf) have been able to aggregate user views of operators based on Twitter - it will be possible to see if overall trust can be affected by particular measures taken by train companies.

Social media is here to stay. It can be treated as something to resist and react to, but in a customer-facing industry it can also be used to interact with users and to improve what's on offer, as well as people's perceptions of the railway.

“Too often, when there is disruption on the railways, passengers are better informed than staff on trains or at stations.”

Trust matters. It is the thing that oils most personal and business relationships. Forget what the contract says - the feeling of trust between consumers and companies is key. Companies that lose that trust can spend years regaining it. Companies that have it will be cut some slack by consumers in difficult situations.

The rail industry is no different. The 2014 groundbreaking work on trust, *Passengers' Relationship with the Rail Industry*, which we have just refreshed, showed the crucial importance of a reliable service as the keystone on which effective communication with passengers can be built. For a whole host of reasons, the train companies which are more trusted are getting their messages direct to passengers. The bigger commuter train companies, in London and the South East in particular, have a harder job. Passengers are generally getting their information about the company from the media - not the best starting point?

Social media represents the best opportunity train companies have for getting their messages across to passengers away from the magnifying lens of the traditional media. The ability to respond to and tailor information for individual passengers during times of disruption is unparalleled. The chance to say everything is running well, which Transport for London does often, is there. The spreading of good news stories and events is on tap. The opportunity to tell people about upcoming disruption, away from the crowded, noisy, environments of stations, is there.

“You will not have much time to think, but the cruel discipline of the 120-or-so Twitter characters will force you to be concise.”



Terry Dunn
CEO, ESP Group

Is the railways' own Flight 3411 moment waiting for an unsuspecting TOC? Are executives looking nervously over their shoulders in fear of a viral video splashing over every media outlet? If not, should they be?

Well, have a look at Anne Wafula Strike's Twitter feed for January. The story of the British wheelchair racer's terrible experience may not have been captured in second-by-second detail, but when she went public over her experience, via a range of channels, I would argue that Flight 3411 met the UK rail industry head-on.

There are, of course, differences. After 3411 United's share value plummeted, its initial response was defensive, and the video made the horrific situation vivid and real. However, the UK-wide coverage of Strike's ordeal, the narrative of her harrowing story, plus the very human nature of the problem - a story of humiliation and inequity - was probably on par.

This begs the question: should we be worried about the social media genie? In Disney's Aladdin, the genie could certainly create problems, but was always well intentioned - unlike Jafar, who was hellbent on overtaking the kingdom through the power of the genie. There is a parallel - I believe social media can be used for good.

New channels provide more opportunities to garner feedback. As an industry dealing with millions of people every day, we need



Anthony Smith
Chief Executive, Transport Focus

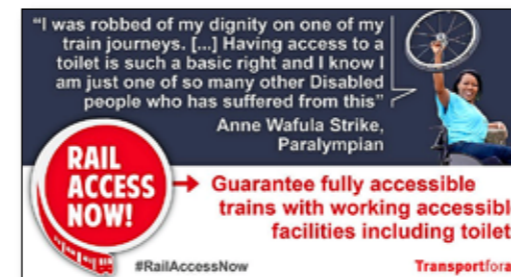
However, every great opportunity contains an equal threat. Train companies run 18-hour (or more) operations every day. Thousands of stations and trains have thousands of staff whom management cannot ever get together in one place - passengers will also have contact with many staff who do not work for your train company. The actions of your dispersed staff and operations will be laid bare by social media for all to see. Good, as you can see what is really going on. And not so good, as controlling the message can be very difficult.

Is this any different to other crisis management situations? Two rules always apply. Show you care and are in control. United Airlines failed on both counts. It could have limited the damage and started to show it cared by how it dealt with the situation. You will not have much time to think, but the cruel discipline of the 120-or-so Twitter characters will force you to be concise! Tone is crucial, as our report *Short and Tweet: How passengers want social media during disruption* showed. Tricky for hierarchical corporations, but you have to let your staff speak it as they want to.

Do not be misled into thinking that the traffic on social media is in any way representative. Transport Focus' National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) gives a snapshot of rail journeys across 20 weeks a

to think like the customer. Unfortunately, we can't be on every train and on every platform to see what it's like for each customer. Therefore, every feedback channel must be embraced to hear people's stories, to allow us to understand what is happening. We need to understand the frustrations and the pinch-points. By doing so, we can head off any potentially huge problems - often caused by our own policies and methods.

We also need to be aware of what works well. I am always pleased to Tweet about the good service I see from staff - like the Train Manager on Virgin Trains East Coast who always genuinely seems pleased to see me at 0548! If we acknowledge excellent behaviour and customer service, we can praise and reward staff as well as encourage others to push the benchmark further. This improves standards and results in new, happy and loyal customers. We celebrate this at Journeycall, our contact centre in Arbroath, with our 'Journeywall', where we post all the positive comments and messages from customers. It's a great way to boost staff and morale.



British wheelchair race Anne Wafula Strike suffered a harrowing experience on a CrossCountry train. She told her story on Twitter and a variety of channels, and the response illustrated the power of social media.



year, and the autumn 2016 wave contained the views of more than 55,000 passengers.

We now have 15 years' worth of data. This represents a very powerful picture of passenger opinion that can be broken down by routes, gender, age and many other ways. It is all available on our website. Yes, the results can sometimes look different to other surveys, but there is a very good reason why. It is asking different things of a representative sample of users in a different way to other surveys.

The NRPS focuses on the journey the passenger has just undertaken. This is deliberate - it produces rich, useful data that the train companies can act on. The results shift around showing that such action has an effect and can be recorded. Other surveys ask more generalised questions about train companies, but there is no check that anyone has even used the companies in question or they are describing the right company. We double-check all of this.

However, what is interesting is that the results of other surveys equate quite closely to our own work on trust - a much more generalised and vaguer feeling which is, nonetheless, important. So we have a good feeling for a snapshot view of passenger opinion, trust and priorities for improvement. This probably adds up to the richest view of passenger satisfaction in the world.

We are developing an app to track how passengers feel about journeys, and hope to develop this further with a view to positioning this inbetween NRPS and social media. Quicker feedback, but with more representativeness.

The railway industry clearly has a lot to teach other industries about social media - Northern gets more tweets each day than British Gas! Time for a conference demonstrating this learning and experience?

“New channels provide more opportunities to garner feedback. As an industry dealing with millions of people every day, we need to think like the customer.”

So, let's not worry too much. Social media can be the ECG, checking our services rhythm, in respect of what's happening out there: both the good and the bad. We need to know.

How do we make sense of it all? The analytics regarding social media can certainly be powerful, but we need to remember the overall goal. What are we trying to achieve? Is it to create positive change, or to simply talk to our customers more?

As an industry, we can also measure this directly. For example, let's use Patient Opinion (now 'Care Opinion') as a proof-point. This non-profit feedback platform for health services allows patients to tell their stories about health care experience. Social care organisations receive these stories direct, and can respond and make necessary changes. And guess what? Most customers are positive and understanding of operational problems, and just want to improve things. It is about fostering honest and meaningful conversations between patients and health services.

As the genie said in Aladdin: "Thank you for choosing Magic Carpet for all your travel needs. Don't stand until the rug has come to a complete stop." Social media is certainly a ride - but well worth taking. Hop on board... and mind the gap. ■ ESP is a provider of back office management systems for transport companies.