

THE PERILS OF PAMPERING

Retail giants, advertising agencies and internet companies are tripping over each other to secure sales concessions at stations and on board trains. However, as Paul Coleman reports, train operators are learning that branding commuters as consumers can backfire

Choose a seat for a train. Opt for a lightweight, alloy and steel module, based on muscular and skeletal research. Cover it with leather, wool or vandal-proof fabric. Go for folding armrests, reclining backs, flip-up footrests and tuck-away seat-back tables.

In-built speakers secreted in seats are all the rage. Try LED lighting, built into the headrest, with low heat and high brightness. Don't forget that the headrests need solid grab points for passengers swaying awkwardly down the aisles. Fancy a scented headrest cover? Will your fragrant antimacassars emanate orange, lemon, fresh pine or seasonal summer fruits?

Understandably, the media tittered at First TransPennine Express for impregnating its headrest covers with a blend of citrus, orange and grapefruit oils. First TransPennine is buying one million scented antimacassars each year from a Hull supplier. 'It's a very subtle fragrance, a fresh, clean blend,' said Vernon Barker, TPE's managing director. 'I'd prefer a single malt,' one passenger quipped.

First ScotRail's own 'light-bulb' moment flickered last Christmas. Staff handed badges to sozzled passengers on which they wrote their destination so fellow passengers could wake them up before they snoozed past their station. Messages included 'Wake Me Up If I Start to Drool'. First Scotrail estimate that three in 10 passengers fall asleep on the train home. Ellie Newlands, head of marketing, said: 'This is a fun initiative created to encourage camaraderie on the train home.'

Passengers enjoy such novelties, especially if the train operating companies don't pass on costs through fare rises but, as c2c discovered, a fine line exists between pampering passengers and tampering with their expectation of a peaceful commute. c2c believed that commuters trundling

into Liverpool Street would universally welcome on-board TNX-system TVs showing a fruit salad of obligatory advertising, ITN news, sports and entertainment and cherry-topped with rail service information.

c2c are receiving a 'commercially confidential' sum from travel TV provider 360 Onboard, which makes its margin by selling TV advertising time to clients who want to catch the eye of commuters on every c2c four-car unit. 'Every coach will have a quiet area for passengers who don't want to be affected,' countered a c2c spokesman, adding: 'This doesn't cost c2c anything.'

Passengers mainly regard Tocs like c2c as train service providers, but companies in the advertising game define them as delivery boys of Captive Audience Networks, or CANs. 'The TNX system enables advertisers to reach a substantial, commercially attractive and captive audience,' brags 360 Onboard.

Train TV concessions with other Tocs have been signed but others are wary of the media frenzy whipped up by c2c passengers who bitterly resent the CAN tag. c2c initially hoped its passengers would be as happy as those on Central Trains, 80 per cent of whom said in a survey that on-board TV was to their liking.

However, as Rasputin might have said, c2c passengers are revolting. Many see train TV as a further intrusion into an already stressful

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commute. The Goose pub near Fenchurch Street is a hotbed of resistance. 'Train TV is an epidemic that needs to be stamped out,' said one passenger. Julie, a regular commuter, cautioned: 'The screens will not be intrusive to begin with. They will be soft and soothing and they will lull us into liking them. We won't even notice the changes they make afterwards. It's a bit like the way we become addicted to anything.'

Elsewhere, the Pitsea Labour Party is churning out leaflets and the Thurrock Rail Users Group is journeying to Birmingham to verify Central's 80 per cent 'happiness' figure. The moral of this saga for Tocs is that there is a market for sophisticated new services on board trains and at stations, but that such pampering can sometimes backfire if media-savvy passengers feel they are being exploited.

Technology is also wagging the Toc dog in more promising ways. T-Mobile is launching its Wi-Fi internet and email access service on Southern Trains' London to Brighton run,

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promising that its 32Mbps WiMax system will secure high-speed connectivity throughout the journey. Southern has stolen a clear lead on other Tocs, including Eurostar which starts its own on-train Wi-Fi trials later this year. Eurostar did roll out Wi-Fi access at its London Waterloo, Ashford and Paris terminals, but Brussels is still to be connected. Britain's rail network leads much of Europe on Wi-Fi connectivity, except for Sweden where – surprise, surprise – all stations are well on the way to becoming Wi-Fi hotspots.

First Great Western, keenly eyeing the Greater Western franchise, was one of the first Tocs to install Wi-Fi connectivity at its main stations, notably in its £300,000 passenger lounge at Paddington. Wi-Fi connectivity and two 240v power sockets per bay for laptop use are promised as part of First Group's new High Speed Train interiors. Passengers have also suggested that trains should be brighter and feel airy, furnished with new carpets, curtains, tables and seats.

Tocs are getting better at consulting passengers, even down to telling on-board caterers like Rail Gourmet to toast their smoked salmon bagels. However, last summer the Public Accounts Committee urged Tocs and Roscos to take greater account of the features and facilities that passengers want in new trains. The committee's spring session to scrutinise station improvements was postponed but, when it finally reconvenes, a key agenda item might be Transport Minister Tony McNulty's long-awaited green light for London Underground's Northern ticket hall at King's Cross.

The Minister's announcement came in the same week that the Prime Minister was stirring

election fever and the International Olympic Committee was inspecting London's 2012 bid, including the extensive works at Kings Cross/St Pancras. Politicking aside, the £400m investment removes the serious doubts that reared up when McNulty suspended works in the new ticket hall in January 2004 as costs escalated. He announced new governance arrangements to ensure costs are strictly controlled, adding: 'I am determined to see that all the works at King's Cross Station are co-ordinated properly so that costs are kept under control and the designs are all fully integrated.'

The new Northern ticket hall, which already has planning permission, will create extra capacity and provide a key interchange between the deep tube lines, the mainline station and St Pancras. The new western concourse directly above the new ticket office has yet to gain planning permission, but the mouth-watering computer-generated drawings promise a grand replacement for the current King's Cross eyesore, creating a new public square, graced by Cubitt's Grade 1 listed arched façade.

King's Cross lags well behind major improvements at other larger stations such as Liverpool Street, where companies like Select Service Partner's food shops, coffee bars and retail concessions have given birth to a mini-shopping city. Even the NHS has caught the rail bug, spending £25m on seven walk-in health centres at Leeds, Manchester Piccadilly, and Newcastle and at London stations including Victoria.

Rail and retail are entwined in a passionate – if sometimes awkward – embrace. Look at the planning furore generated by Tesco erecting a superstore and car park directly over the railway cutting at Gerrard's Cross. Tim Yeo told *Rail Professional* last November that 'almost every railway station represents a brownfield site full of potential for commercial and residential development'. This view was echoed by Virgin Trains which has called for £50m to be spent on West Coast Main Line stations that 'are now in desperate need of upgrading'.

In reality, the money needs to be spent sooner and even further down the lines away from the main termini. A typical target of such investment might be Grange Park, a quiet north London suburban commuter station on the Great Northern line between Hertford North and London Moorgate. Broken destination signs are pock-marked with airgun pellets. Passengers and even the pigeons, foxes and muntjac deer spurn the 'shelters' that are wide open to the wind, rain and the spray-can louts who regularly refresh the graffiti.

For many passengers, this is the reality of their railway travel experiences. It's all a very long way from citrus scented antimacassars – and it shows how much still needs to be done at the most basic level to keep the customers satisfied.



Captive audience – having a TV in the carriage proved popular with passengers on Central Trains, but provoked a hostile response on c2c. The former Transport Minister Kim Howells, (right), poses with Central's managing director, Nick Brown at the launch of the new service.