

# RESCUING RAIL'S REPUTATION

**Ever since privatisation, the railways have received a bad press. But is that beginning to change? Simon Montague considers how rail companies might yet win the PR battle**



When Virgin officially launched its new Pendolino service between London and Manchester, it received an ecstatic press. The tilting train made the journey in a record one hour and 53 minutes. 'Tilting train sets west coast record' read *The Guardian's* headline. 'Tilt train's a winner' screamed the *Sun*.

But when the new Pendolino timetable began a week later, one of the first trains broke down and another was cancelled. Even more unfortunately, it was on the same day that Sir Richard Branson was launching his plans to send tourists into space. 'Meanwhile, back on Earth... Euston, we have a problem' giggled the *Daily Telegraph*. The reality is that Virgin has invested vast sums in a world-beating set of trains that would never have been procured under the old British Rail. Trains that are transforming long distance journeys. But the media reporting that the railways are a bad joke, incapable of delivering the performance they promise, shows only sporadic signs of changing.

Why, for the last decade, have the railways got such a negative press? A highly unpopular privatisation laid the foundation. Fragmentation

caused confusion. A series of disasters were blamed on managers who failed to run the railways safely. Railtrack collapsed as costs soared. Performance fell as public investment rose.

On top of this, the railways occupy a special place in the British psyche. We invented them. We instinctively want to be proud of them. Yet our hopes, like those of soccer fans watching Britain's national teams, are too frequently dashed.

Indeed, the politicians have shaped the industry into a football, kicked from end to end. Ministers shout for results. Two powerful regulators impose the rules. The Health and Safety Executive chastises dangerous play. The Rail Passengers Council heckles loudly from the sidelines. Passengers and taxpayers pay ever more for it all and ask where their money is going. No wonder journalists in the commentary box find so many critics to quote, and so much that is negative to say.

All this has created a perception from which the railways have found it hard to escape. Never mind the fact that more people are travelling by train than for 50 years. Or that there's more new rolling stock than ever before. Or that safety continues to improve, year after year.

So what can be done, if the railways are to win the public relations battle? For a start, rail should communicate its successes. Good on Virgin, for repeatedly launching and re-launching its new trains until it was red in the face, and still the journalists turned up to enjoy the razzamatazz. Good on Eurostar, for making a song and dance over its UK speed record on the new Channel Tunnel Rail Link, even though achieving it was a mere formality (and unlucky that Jarvis caused a derailment at King's Cross the same day). Good on the Association of Train Operating Companies for highlighting the billionth passenger journey in one year. Good, too, on the bosses at Network Rail who hold lunchtime briefings for transport correspondents, to keep them in the picture.

And shame on the rail bosses who don't take the trouble to explain things to the media. On the press officers who turn down filming

Waiting game ... like soccer fans watching Britain's national teams, rail users' hopes are all too frequently dashed.



requests, forcing television news crews to work without permission (I know, I used to do it regularly). Shame on those in the industry who hope that if they say nothing, journalists will one day go away. They won't. They need to be nurtured, with a constant drip-feed of briefings, positive stories and access to managers, or they'll have no sympathy when things go wrong.

Having said that, the railways have been less in the press this year. I suspect that rail is dropping down the news agenda for the first time since I started covering it at the beginning of the 1990s. The worst parts of the privatisation structure are being sorted out. There were no deaths in train accidents in 2003 (the Train Protection and Warning System seems to be doing its bit). And performance is, oh so slowly, getting better. But – and this is the crucial bit – none of this has changed the underlying media perception.

One out of six trains still runs late, despite all the investment. Delays, and the inability to get back to pre-Hatfield levels of performance, remain the negative starting point for so much of media reporting.

And safety is the area where rail's reputation remains catastrophically vulnerable. Research shows there were 560 articles on rail safety in national newspapers last year. Of those, 481 were negative. That's more than one a day. Two

thirds of them referred to accidents such as Hatfield and Potters Bar. So, despite the fact that no-one died in a train accident last year, issues related to safety are still covered in the context of past disasters.

What's more, there is a continuing quest for blame. Never-ending police inquiries and looming prosecutions of managers linked to those accidents means another damaging perception remains; that the people in charge still can't be trusted to run the railways safely. If

### **Individual rail bosses – if you're one, that's you – need to come out of their shells, identify the good news, ring up journalists, invite them over, and explain what's going on. Scary, but not difficult**

(or when) there is another accident, rail will be back to square one.

Is there a solution? Yes. But it requires individual rail bosses – if you're one, that's you I'm referring to – to come out of their shells, identify the good news, ring up journalists, invite them over, and explain what's going on. Scary, but not difficult.

And then go one vital stage further. Organisations across the rail industry currently issue a deluge of performance and safety information, to try to demonstrate their transparency and to change journalists' perceptions. But detailed research into media

attitudes shows this flood of statistics from different bodies is too daunting and difficult to understand. It fails to make its mark. It has become a *barrier* to communication.

What's needed, particularly on safety but on performance too, is a single authoritative voice. Producing up-to-date, easily understood facts and explanation, individually shaped for the media target the railways are trying to reach.

Whose voice might be believed? Not the Department for Transport – too close to

politicians. Network Rail carries too much historical baggage. Atoc doesn't represent the entire industry. That leaves other potential candidates like the Office of Rail Regulation, soon to take over Rail Inspectorate functions; the Railway Safety and Standards Board; or the forthcoming Rail Accident Investigation Branch.

Which it should be is up to the industry to decide. But a story is better told by one voice than by a bunch of people all talking at once.

*Simon Montague works for top PR consultancy Fishburn Hedges and was until recently Transport Correspondent for BBC News.*

