

Community Ambassadors for Increasing Patronage on Local Railways

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Abstract

Community Ambassadors were employed by Northern Rail to promote off-peak train use amongst hard-to-reach groups, such as ethnic minorities, English language learners, people with disabilities or without employment. Their work involved developing trust with 'gate-keepers' and client groups and being sensitive to the lack of knowledge of how to use trains amongst many of these groups. This paper discusses theoretical approaches to increasing use of travel modes and similar Ambassador schemes. It describes how the Community Ambassadors worked and the potential criteria to judge their effectiveness, but explains how the scheme was abruptly halted, before evaluation.

This raises questions about the vulnerability to outside pressures of such pioneering schemes and the conflicts between short and long-term time horizons. Building up trust and confidence takes time and patience, and is easily undone by decisions made by remote company bosses and politicians. It discusses the benefits to society and train operators of making travel modes more available and what can be learnt from the short life of this scheme.

Introduction

In 2011 Northern Rail and a number of other agencies introduced four community ambassadors for outreach work among communities known to be under-represented among rail users. The scheme ran until the spring of 2014, when it was abruptly halted and the then three Community Ambassadors lost their positions. The Institute of Transport and Tourism at University of Central Lancashire was at that time conducting an evaluation of the scheme to see what could be learnt and passed on to other transport companies about the costs and benefits of ambassador schemes.

This paper describes the research until the cessation of the scheme and pieces together the evidence about its impact. As well as the un-expected end of the intervention, the research suffered from the lack of clearly defined criteria for assessing the scheme. Here we discuss the type of criteria which might be employed and evaluate the scheme against them.

The next section of the paper explores theoretical approaches to increasing use of travel modes and is followed by a description of other travel ambassador schemes. The methodology is described before a summary of the main findings from the research. A further section discusses the possible criteria for judging the success of such initiatives and attempts an evaluation of the Community Ambassador scheme. The discussion looks at what can be learnt and applied, both about the effectiveness of ambassadors for promoting travel modes and the difficulty of completing an evaluation when the intervention is removed. It also questions the long-term commitment of commercial companies to quasi-social projects when the financial situation deteriorates. Lastly the Conclusions summarise the findings and make recommendations for future research and intervention.

Encouraging public transport use

In a perfect market, people would be making rational choices and trade-offs between time, costs and convenience on how they travelled with perfect information about their alternatives. This would allow supply and demand to be reconciled at an appropriate price. However, we know that the choices we make are bound up with force of habit, lack of information-seeking (Godwin, Kitamura and Meurs 1990), misperceptions about alternatives (Beale and Bonsall, 2007) and the emotions engendered through previous use (Carrus, Passafaro and Bonnes, 2008).

Transport with its high infrastructure and relatively fixed costs means that it often makes sense to carry passengers outside of the peak demand for less than the average cost as long as marginal costs are covered and extra revenue generated (Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 2009). The main methods of attracting off-peak travellers revolve around pricing, with tools such as railcards, lower fares and two-for-one travel, etc, and marketing such as encouraging leisure travel to nearby destinations. These only attract people who currently consider the mode of travel, but exclude people who are unaware of it or never include it in their travel choice sets.

Here marketing theory can be useful in understanding the stages people pass through from not knowing about a product to purchasing it and returning to purchase it (see Peppard and Butler, 1998). Before wanting to buy a product, prospective customers need to perceive a problem they feel might be solved by a product, then seek information about the alternatives, evaluate them and choose to purchase one. Their satisfaction with the product may determine whether they purchase it again. This model has been adopted by social marketing to help understand the types of intervention that are necessary to change behaviours (see Bamberg, 2013), although it is often used to target undesirable behaviour.

Because the Community Ambassador scheme involves people who do not yet contemplate using trains, it corresponds to the 'problem recognition' stage in marketing (Peppard and Butler, 1998) or 'pre-decisional' stage in social marketing (Bamberg, 2013). This is a stage when customers may be helped to define and articulate a problem, while the supplier may try to get to know the customer and their needs better and to focus on awareness raising (Peppard and Butler, 1998). The model of self-regulated behavioural change (Bamberg, 2013) suggests that people at this stage should not be asked to change their behaviour, but be 'pushed' towards thinking about the negative consequences of it. However, this is more relevant to people being asked to contemplate reducing car use for more sustainable ways of travel, rather than people being invited to think about increasing their travel options and destinations, by being introduced to a mode they had not previously contemplated. Yet, the same approaches, such as offering a free trial of the target mode (Bamberg 2013) may be appropriate.

Other Ambassador Schemes

The inspiration for the Community Ambassador scheme came from a similar programme on the Docklands Light Railway. Ambassadors were introduced when it was noted that local people rarely used the railway that ran through their district. Ambassadors regularly give presentations at schools, hold drop-in sessions at local supermarkets, libraries, when people can get information and advice about travel on the railway, organise accessibility trips for people with difficulties using the railway, such as using a stick or wheelchair or pushing a buggy and distribute leaflets about the destinations accessible on the railway. Several ambassadors come from ethnic minority groups and, together, they offer an impressive range of languages to communicate with passengers. They advise on local transport planning (Transport for London, 2015).

Another highly successful and visible use of ambassadors, this time volunteers, was during the London Olympics and Paralympics in 2012. With thousands of people from all over the world, mostly unfamiliar with London's transport system and many not speaking English, there was potential for confusion and the delays this causes in crowded stations. Volunteers in pink tabards, many with computer tablets, provided information and reassurance, freeing up operational staff. Their helpfulness and friendliness won praise from visitors and helped

the transport system maintain flows of passengers even with concentrated high demand (ODA Transport Team 2012).

Two schemes in continental Europe used volunteers to encourage older people to make more use of public transport. In Offenbach-am Main, Germany, the aim was to help people who had given up driving and who might be unfamiliar with local public transport provision as well as maintain mobility and support more sustainable methods of travel. The trainers, all over 55, give presentations to older people about buying tickets and using public transport., so helping to break down the barriers perceived by older people. Since its start in May 2010, 25 trainers have been trained and 200 people have participated in the project and the positive feedback means the scheme will be continued even after the end of funding to its parent project (Eltis, 2015a).

A similar scheme was started in 2009 in the rural area of Zeeland, Netherlands. Again volunteer trainers of 55 and over were recruited, trained about using public transport, tariffs and a proposed system of e-ticketing, which challenges older people, and, it was discovered, the ambassadors themselves. The ambassadors organise presentations and test rides with the aim of encouraging older people to maintain their mobility and combatting isolation (Eltis, 2015b).

The importance of personal contact has also been recognised in moves to encourage more cycling and walking in several countries (eg UK, USA, Germany, Denmark and Netherlands). Several cities encourage cycling and/or walking by training ambassadors or 'buddies' to take people on trips, talk about their experience or pass on tips about how to enjoy walking or cycling safely in the city. Many such schemes use volunteers to accompany people who want to get out of their cars, but lack the knowledge or confidence to make trips on foot or bike. This support helps them to cross the threshold between 'wanting' and 'doing' through encouragement from the ambassadors (Herefordshire County Council, no date; Portland, Bureau of Transportation, no date; Pucher and Buehler, 2007; Seaton, 2011; Transport Alternatives, no date)

Methodology

A researcher from the Institute interviewed each Ambassador at length about what they did, how they measured their success and decided their priorities. She also accompanied two of the Ambassadors on their duties on four occasions and talked to their 'clients'. Following the end of the scheme, attempts were made to contact groups who had been visited by the Community Ambassadors and a short survey was sent to the types of groups they had helped in the Burnley area, but only two replies were received. Phone contact was made with two groups and interviews conducted. All the interviews (Community Ambassadors and representatives of client groups) were recorded with the interviewees' permission and transcribed for analysis.

In addition, an on-line search of relevant reports, news items and publicity was conducted. The findings mostly relate to the interviews and observations made of the ambassadors' work, supplemented by the on-line materials.

Context

The Community Ambassadors were introduced by Northern Rail in 2011 supported by the Department for Transport, Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive and East Lancashire Community Rail Partnership and 50% funded by the Citizens' Rail (EU Interreg IVB) project (Community Rail Lancashire 2013). They were charged with '*raising awareness of rail travel and making it more accessible to ethnic minority communities around four ... stations in the north of England*' (Northern Rail 2010): Blackburn, Brierfield, Rochdale and Farnworth. Initially there were four part-time ambassadors, but later three, two women from ethnic minorities and a part-time male conductor. Leaflets and reports were printed explaining the scheme and giving contact times and numbers.

The scheme attracted favourable attention in the local and professional press and in 2013 was awarded a European Rail Congress Award for 'Customer Service and Information Excellence' (Briginshaw 2013). An independent study found that brand-awareness of Northern Rail had increased 20% because of the scheme and its promotion (Northern Rail

2013). It also estimated that the Community Ambassadors were responsible for half of the increased patronage of 14% on the lines between 2011 and 2013 (Northern Rail 2013).

In 2013, the Institute of Transport and Tourism at the University of Central Lancashire was asked to evaluate the Community Ambassador scheme as part of the Citizens' Rail project. This began in spring 2013, but before it could be completed, the Community Ambassador scheme was abruptly halted in March 2014.

How the Community Ambassadors worked

The Community Ambassadors made contact with numbers of groups in their areas. They particularly sought out groups who make little use of trains. These included English language learners, women in refuges, mosque congregations, students, job-seekers, newly arrived immigrants and refugees and clubs and centres for disabled and older people. Many of these groups were hard to find, with no web presence and often an introduction was made through someone from a group which had already been visited.

They talked about the need to gain the trust of the 'gatekeeper' to each group and often they had a few meetings with them, before meeting the group. They would also try to meet the needs and purpose of the group, so, for example, devising a lesson about travel for English language learners, introducing new potential destinations for people who do not know the area very well or talking about job possibilities in other areas for job-seekers. Great importance was placed on getting to know the needs of the group, fitting in with them, for example 'dressing down' not 'up' for some groups, listening to their needs. As illustration,, the contact with a group for deaf and hard-of-hearing young people used the session to discuss a number of life skills such as planning the itinerary and managing money.

Once this contact had been made, the Community Ambassador would visit the group several times to get to know them and for them to get to know him/her. This was seen as an important element in creating trust in order to arrange an accessibility trip.

The two accessibility trips observed by the researcher were conducted by different Community Ambassadors. One had been arranged for English language learners at a local Further Education college, the other was for members of an English class for women who had recently arrived in the UK. Although there were a number of different nationalities in the class, all those partaking in the accessibility trip were all young Pakistani women who had recently married into the Asian community of Halifax. None of them had travelled by train before, either in the UK or Pakistan, where apparently it is not considered safe for young women to travel by train.

The Community Ambassadors explained many of the procedures familiar to regular train-users, such as how to buy a ticket, how to find out which platform your train will arrive on and being aware that your destination might not be that of the train (so the train for Halifax may be going to Leeds as its final destination). There appears to be considerable fear that a train may leave while a passenger is boarding or alighting, which can be alleviated by careful explanation of the safety procedures. Once on the train, one group were relieved to learn safety belts were not necessary, because of the relative safety of train travel. The Community Ambassador had activities and information for the group and often the conductor was invited to talk to them.

Once at the destination, there might be a visit to an attraction (the Halifax trip went The Armouries in Leeds) or opportunity for visits to the shops, to share a meal or other activity appropriate to the group. The Community Ambassador would then accompany the group back to their home station, answer their questions and arrange a follow-up visit. Developing trust and continuity was seen as critical to helping the group.

'if I've made contact with a particular group, established a relationship with them, I've taken them out, gone back to them for feedback and we've had feedback forms filled in, then I try to go back, show my face, so it is refreshing the contact.' (Community Ambassador)

For some groups, travelling by train or visiting new destinations involved going outside their comfort zone. Many of the people from the deaf and hard-of-hearing group from Halifax had

not encountered escalators previously, none had been to Manchester and only one had been to a local beauty spot at Hebden Bridge. Worries about not hearing the announcements prevented many of them from using trains. Some wanted a card to show to railway staff to explain their difficulties, which might not be immediately apparent.

As well as education about how to use trains, the visits were intended to be fun events, which bolstered confidence for future trips and this seemed to have worked. The organiser of one group reported that the trip was greatly appreciated as a day out for a group which lacks opportunity for this kind of activity. *'They have never forgotten the visit'*. On a subsequent visit to Manchester, the students *'were sticking to us like glue'* but on later visits some managed to go shopping in pairs or wandered around a Museum by themselves. The Community Ambassadors were very aware that the benefits of such visits reached beyond introducing groups to trains travel and often provided an opportunity for personal development and growth.

The Community Ambassadors were also involved in a number of events such as open-days, fun days, fairs, book week and different committees meeting in the area. (For example, the researcher attended a meeting of women involved with community work in Burnley during one 'ambassador shadowing day'.) During the 'second phase' of the scheme more emphasis was placed on targeting students, as potential long-term passengers (Northern Rail 2013)

Another aspect of their work involved reporting back particular problems encountered by any groups. One, which received action, was anxiety felt by women travelling on their own and conductors were instructed to walk through the train between every station to reassure passengers and be a 'visible presence'. They also helped the railway company with its policies on social inclusion and cultural awareness.

One of the problems encountered particularly by the part-time conductor was that he was often called to work as a conductor with very short notice when a conductor was needed. This inevitably resulted in broken arrangements for his work as a Community Ambassador and hampered building up the trust they all felt was vital for dealing with these groups often with very vulnerable members. The sudden withdrawal of the scheme also damaged much of the goodwill and trust that the Community Ambassadors had developed with the groups on behalf of the railway company. Publicity about its demise was understandably much more muted than its launch, so the groups we approached were not aware it had ended, only that they had not heard from their Community Ambassador recently.

Criteria for Evaluation

No specific criteria were given for the evaluation, which placed additional responsibility onto the researchers and raised some interesting questions about how such a scheme should measure its success. Many of the methods discussed relied on types of monitoring not possible in the research, for example commercial confidentiality prevented recording of passenger numbers.

Another dilemma was the time scale involved, for although one might hope some of the people introduced to the train service might immediately start using the local services, part of the aim was to raise awareness which might be transmitted through word-of-mouth to others, especially those in 'hard-to-reach' communities. Such transmission takes time, but grows faster than the numbers of people seen by the Community Ambassadors. Thus, one would hope the longer time the scheme was in action the more successful it would become. However, the longer the time span the harder it is to attribute changes in patronage and patterns of use to specific interventions amid the myriad of other influences such as the costs and availability of alternative modes, the state of the local economy, weather, changes in the composition of the population, etc.

When asked about how they would measure their own success, the Community Ambassadors tended to reply in terms of the satisfaction of the people they had contacted and accompanied on accessibility trips. There was a strong feeling that the railway was a public good, to which everyone was entitled access and if their failure to use it was due to lack of knowledge or confidence, this could be addressed by the ambassadors' actions. There was no shortage of anecdotes of how going on an accessibility trip had improved people's lives, introduced them to new possibilities in terms of travel, destinations,

sometimes jobs as well as enhancing confidence and ability to participate in society. While this was accomplished by focussing on mobility opportunities, many of the achievements related to social inclusion more than travel.

There is no doubt that the Community Ambassador scheme generated favourable publicity and goodwill for Northern Rail in the local, professional press and media, as well as demonstrating their ethos of caring for communities in their area through leaflets, posters at stations, etc. The Ambassadors also gave Northern Rail a presence in communities and at forums they otherwise would not have reached. In this way it successfully supported a wider marketing strategy.

What is unknown is how many extra rail trips were made as a direct, or indirect result of their actions. Before the Institute of Transport and Tourism was involved in the evaluation, it had been estimated from a survey their intervention had generated 7% extra patronage, but it is unclear how that figure was arrived at. The scheme was halted before any further monitoring could be attempted, which suggests that Northern Rail did not feel that their contributions vastly outweighed their salaries.

Discussion

The scheme does not fit happily into the model offered by social marketing where the terminology about undesired behaviour and desired behaviours (Bamberg 2013) is inappropriate. Yet, the groups it targeted are definitely at the pre-decisional stage and the action of awareness-raising aptly describes what the Community Ambassadors did.

The absence of evaluation criteria meant that several different criteria had to be considered. It appears that the Community Ambassadors' scheme was most evidently successful on grounds of social inclusion and 'customer' satisfaction. It is harder to ascertain whether it increased patronage and to what extent and it is likely that such increases are due a variety of factors which include the intervention of the Community Ambassadors. It was also reasonably successful at generating positive publicity and image for the railway company and even its less-publicised demise was perceived as a loss, rather than as negative.

The painstaking building up of trust and confidence undertaken by the Community Ambassadors was well-received by the groups they contacted and accompanied as well as the organisers. As a strategy for gaining acceptance, this seems to have worked, but it may have been less than cost-efficient in terms of the extra patronage generated.

With further research, it would have been possible to follow up groups who had been on accessibility trips and investigate whether their attitudes and train use had altered since the trip and contact. However, the end of the scheme during the research period meant only retrospective accounts would have been possible and the groups proved 'hard-to-reach' for research as well as for attracting onto trains. If such a scheme were to be researched again, it would be useful to investigate attitudes before and after the contact with the Community Ambassador and perhaps issue tickets which would register train trips made after the initial accessibility trip.

The company itself appear to have had reservations about the scheme. These were manifested by giving priority to conductor's duties when there was a clash for the part-time Community Ambassador/conductor, thus undermining the arrangements and trust that the employee was able to build up with community groups. The decision to suddenly 'pull' the scheme at a week's notice also suggests a lack of commitment.

Conclusions

The research investigated the effectiveness of the outreach work undertaken by Community Ambassadors employed by Northern Rail to make contact with and encourage 'hard-to-reach' groups to make greater use of local railways. It was hampered by lack of evaluation criteria and the end of the scheme during the study period.

It is easier to evaluate this scheme on the grounds of improving social inclusion, than increasing rail patronage, especially as how one is able to travel determines many of one's other opportunities in life. The Community Ambassadors appear to have increased the range

of options available to often excluded communities and improved understanding of those communities' needs. They also succeeded in removing anxieties about using trains and making accessibility trips fun, so associating train travel with positive emotions.

The scheme opened doors, increased social integration and, for many of the communities, it constituted an important message about caring and wanting them to be integrated. Northern Rail benefitted from being associated with actions of the Community Ambassadors through extra positive publicity and improved image. Whether or not it increased patronage, and specifically off-peak patronage, on local trains is less certain and would need more comprehensive follow up and monitoring.

In summary, the research suggests that the scheme was definitely successful in its roles of improving social inclusion and of generating favourable publicity and image for the company, but remains 'unproven' in its generation of extra patronage.

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