
Community Ambassadors: Transport Initiative or Social Service?

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Abstract

Publicity and pricing have traditionally been used to increase passenger numbers on public transport. However, many people do not include it in their choice sets when considering journeys or destinations, so remain uninfluenced by such campaigns. Northern Rail attempted to reach such potential passengers using Community Ambassadors to make personal contact with groups known to make little use of the railways. This paper describes how they worked and some of the difficulties of evaluating their impact. It raises questions about the political nature of evaluation, the vulnerability of pioneering schemes and the purpose of transport networks.

1 Introduction

In 2011, Northern Rail in conjunction with a number of other agencies employed four Community Ambassadors to do outreach work on their behalf. They were charged with making contact with “hard-to-reach” groups, finding out about their needs and encouraging them to use local trains at off-peak times. As well as potential passengers, the railway company hoped to gain insights into the requirements of such passengers and how they could improve the service to meet their needs. In 2013, the Institute of Transport and Tourism was asked to evaluate the scheme as part of their work with Citizens’ Rail, an EU Interreg IVB project (Community Rail Lancashire 2013) which was funding 50% of the cost of the ambassadors. Unfortunately before the evaluation was completed, Northern Rail terminated the Ambassadors’ contracts and the scheme, effectively enacting their own evaluation.

This paper describes other ways in which ambassadors or volunteers have been used to help or encourage travel on specific modes. A short section explains how the research was conducted and discusses problems caused by the lack of criteria. The next section summarises how Northern Rail’s ambassadors worked and the type of relationships they needed to establish with their client groups and is followed by a description of what we know about the impact of their work. The discussion focusses on the lessons learnt from the experiment of using Community Ambassadors and the questions raised by the abrupt ending of the scheme. The type of criteria for evaluation and what they say about current priorities in transport are debated. The conclusions summarise the findings.

2 Background to Paper

2.1 Ambassador schemes in transport

Ambassadors have been used for a variety of transport initiatives and there has often been an emphasis on recruiting ambassadors with some of the characteristics of the target group. The scheme which inspired Northern Rail’s project was the Docklands Light Railway, where it was discovered that, although a large number of people from ethnic minority groups lived very close to the railway, there were disproportionately low numbers of them using the line. Seven Ambassadors speaking an impressive range of languages are now employed to help first-time passengers and those with special needs (Serco, not dated). They hold drop-in sessions, when members of the public can ask questions, arrange accessibility trips, so people can try out the line and advise people with disabilities or children in pushchairs on how to make the most of the railway.

During the Olympics and Paralympics in London, 2012, volunteer ambassadors in stations and other public transport hubs provided advice and reassurance for those visiting the games. 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, kept flows of people moving and allowed paid staff to concentrate on operational matters.

Two similar schemes have used older volunteers to encourage 'seniors' to use public transport for environmental and social reasons. In Germany, Offenbach-am-Main, volunteers aged over 55 have been recruited to show older people how to use tickets machines and the local public transport. It was designed to help people who have given up driving or might be unfamiliar with local buses, and, since May 2010, 200 people have participated under the guidance of the 25 trainers (Eltis, 2015a).

The motive behind a scheme in rural Zeeland in the Netherlands was to combat isolation, increase mobility and to help older people with a new system of e-ticketing. However, one of the first findings was that the new system also baffled the trainers, all volunteers were over 55 years old. The volunteers do presentations and organise test rides to familiarise older people with the bus system and how to use it (Eltis, 2015b).

Several areas in many countries (eg UK, Germany, USA, Netherlands and Denmark) have instigated 'buddy' systems to help people overcome fears and doubts about walking and cycling. As well as giving talks to people who want to use active modes, most of these schemes offer accompanied walking or cycling to give people supported experience before they travel alone, giving them the courage to cross the threshold between wanting and doing (see Edinburgh University, Herefordshire County Council, not dated; Pucher and Buehler, 2007; Seaton, 2011; Transport Alternatives, not dated).

On the railways, ambassadors are being employed at stations on the new Borders Railway to welcome visitors (Scottish Borders Council, 2015) and abellio intends to use Community Ambassadors for outreach work on the Scottish rail network (abellio, 2016). There has also been a scheme to recruit local people to 'adopt' stations in Scotland, tidying them up, combatting vandalism and providing a more welcoming environment for travellers (Yellowlees, 2012).

2.2 Theoretical background

Although public transport providers are increasingly being expected to meet their costs through the farebox, matching costs and revenue is complex. Most costs are incurred regardless of passenger numbers, and vary more on fleet size (mainly determined by the peak demand), mileage, staff costs and, in the case of rail, the cost of permanent infrastructure and its maintenance. This means that extra patronage at off-peak times causes few extra costs, but creates fares from spare capacity and is economic providing the fares cover the marginal cost of the extra passengers. Most efforts to 'sell' this service revolve around pricing, such as offering cheaper fares or offers such as two-for-one fares and or promotions of suitable destinations.

However, there are groups of people, who for different reasons do not consider using public transport to satisfy a travel need and so will not respond to such promotions. Here marketing theory gives more understanding of the processes involved in purchasing a product or in this case a service. Both in commercial and social marketing, it is recognised that a potential customer goes through several stages on the way to adopting a desired behaviour. The initial stage is being unaware that there is a problem which might be solved, this may be followed by increasing awareness of a problem and a possible solution. The next stage is followed by a search for information about the alternatives to solve the problem, evaluating them and then making a decision about which to choose. The experience of the product/type of behaviour will influence decisions about whether to use it again. These stages are named differently according to the context/author, but most resemble Prochaska and DiClemente's (1983) Stages of Change Model (Davies, 2012, European Platform on Mobility Management, 2009) with five stages, four of which are relevant for changing transport habits:

- pre-contemplation
 - when no change in behaviour is anticipated and no problem is perceived with current patterns
- contemplation,
 - when a change in behaviour is considered because some uneasiness with the current mode, but a lack of information and perhaps confidence may prevent decisions about which mode to change to
- preparation and action
 - when alternative behaviours have been chosen, but there is a need for more information and incentives to make the move
- maintenance
 - when the new behaviour has been adopted, but may lapse especially when it is not very rewarding

(European Platform on Mobility Management, 2009)

Different actions are needed at different stages to encourage a change in behaviour, for example at the pre-contemplation stage social marketing aims to make people aware of the negative aspects of their current behaviour, while at the contemplation stage, there is a need for information about the alternatives (European Platform on Mobility Management, 2009).

While the groups targeted by the Community Ambassadors were not seen as having negative behaviours, they definitely fall into the pre-contemplation stage and the ambassadors encouraged them to move into the next two stages.

2.3 Methodology

Qualitative methods were appropriate for the research as there were no clearly defined criteria or metrics identified to assess the impact of the Community Ambassadors' work. A researcher accompanied two of the ambassadors for two days each while they worked with different client groups, she also interviewed each Community Ambassador at length. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed with the interviewees' permission. Once the project had been abruptly terminated, before the research was completed attempts were made to contact client groups, which yielded little result, but two telephone interviews with representatives of groups who had used the services of the Ambassadors were conducted, recorded (with permission) and transcribed. The fieldwork was supplemented by relevant reports, press coverage, websites, etc.

3 Main Content

3.1 Findings

The groups targeted by the Community Ambassadors included people who were new to the area, such as recent immigrants, refugees, residents of women's refuges and new students or people who might be unfamiliar with train travel because of language or mobility barriers. They were approached through language classes, mosques and other religious organisations, centres and clubs for people with disabilities or senior citizens. They also engaged with job-seekers and people retraining in order to find jobs. Many of these groups were hard to find, with no web presence and sometimes poorly integrated into the local community. One Community Ambassador described how she walked around her neighbourhood, asking shopkeepers and other about clubs and groups operating in the area. Frequently the introduction was through someone who was also a member of a group which had already been helped by a Community Ambassador.

This meant a lot of their time was spent finding and approaching such groups. Also, once the group had been identified, it needed time to gain the trust of the group leader or 'gate-keeper' before meeting the members. The Community Ambassadors spoke of the importance of building up trust with people who were often marginalised from society and with reasons to mistrust people from an official world.

To this end, they prepared activities in line with the aims of the group, for example an English language class might be doing a session on using public transport and the ambassadors would help with vocabulary and phrases, or a groups of NEETs (not in education, employment and training) might be learning life-skills and using public transport might offer a useful scenario.

Once trust had been established and where it was appropriate, an accessibility trip would be planned. The researcher accompanied two accessibility trips. One was a group of young Pakistani women who had recently married into Halifax's Asian community. The Community Ambassador and researcher had first attended a Christmas coffee morning, then helped with a lesson and then arranged a trip from Halifax to Leeds Armouries. None of the students had travelled by train before, as it was considered too dangerous for young women in Pakistan. The other group was of college English language learners from mixed background (European and Asian) from Burnley and they went on an accompanied trip to Blackpool. The ambassadors deliberately chose destinations which would appeal to the group and make the whole day feel like fun.

The accessibility trip was an opportunity for the Community Ambassador to explain a number of procedures and practices which might not be familiar to a first-time user. This includes how to buy a ticket, check which platform the train would arrive on, understand that the train might have a destination beyond the passenger's (so a passenger heading for Halifax from Leeds might catch the Manchester train), expect a ticket check, know the role of the conductor and be able to find the exit on arrival.

For some groups, the whole experience was outside the members' comfort zone yet offered an opportunity for personal growth and development and the ambassadors were aware they had to be as supportive as possible. One leader of group of a deaf and hard-of-hearing group explained how many of them had never used escalators before, none had ever been to Manchester and on the first visit they stuck '*to us like glue*' but '*[t]hey have never forgotten the visit*', on later visits some went shopping or round a museum in pairs. Common anxieties included fear that the train would leave before they had completely boarded or alighted, and wondering why there are no seat belts on trains.

The communication was not just one way. The Community Ambassadors were able to report back aspects of train travel that deterred potential passengers, this resulted in conductors being asked to walk through the train between each stop to provide reassurance particularly to women passengers. Another suggestion from the deaf and hard of hearing group was that they could carry a card explaining their disability which they could show to staff when they needed assistance. The two Community Ambassadors from ethnic minorities also offered their help to the railway company and the Transport Police to explain cultural issues.

Other duties undertaken by the Community Ambassadors included representing Northern Rail on committees dealing with social issues, attending open days, fairs, fun days, etc. where they gave out information about train services and railway safety. They also dealt with individual requests for assistance and answered queries, gave presentations and helped with showcasing the local train services.

One of the problems which emerged through the interviews was that one of the ambassadors was also a part-time conductor and he was often called to take on this role at short notice, causing him to have to cancel appointments made as a Community Ambassador. This made it difficult for him to build up the trust and rapport with groups, which all the ambassadors felt was vital for successful working and outcomes. The ending of the scheme with just a few days' notice also made it difficult for the ambassadors to contact all their groups and explain that their services would no longer be available.

3.2 Discussion

The criteria for evaluation were never fully established with project partners, which made it difficult to ascertain whether the scheme was successful or not. The sudden withdrawal of the scheme suggests it was not highly prized by the railway company, who quickly identified it as a way to reduce running costs without taking off operational staff or capacity.

Several of the ambassadors' actions generated favourable local press coverage enhancing the reputation of the railway company. It was evident that the scheme was extremely popular with the client groups. There were several anecdotes about individuals realising they now had another mode of travel to reach destinations previously considered inaccessible and also about the boost in confidence the contact with the ambassadors had engendered amongst different groups and communities. Unfortunately the rail usage resulting from their interventions was never monitored, so it is not known whether the increased patronage in any way covered the cost of employing the ambassadors.

The ambassadors talked about their work with individuals and groups as a public 'good', tackling social exclusion and allowing people from often marginalised groups to play a fuller role in society. Many of the other European project partners also saw the railway network as a national asset which everyone had a right to use and enjoy. These perspectives differ from the purely commercial evaluation of whether the Community Ambassadors generated more patronage and also suggest that benefits such as social inclusion and increased independence for some individuals should also be evaluated. Eventually, the choice of criteria determines the success, or not, of any scheme.

4 Conclusions

This research found that the Community Ambassadors employed by Northern Rail were successful at encouraging different groups to try train travel, enhancing the reputation of the railway company and engaging with groups who often do not consider train travel in their travel choice sets. There is insufficient evidence to ascertain whether they increased patronage significantly, but they evidently did improve the quality of life and increase the options of groups they worked with. They also helped groups who are often marginalized to be and feel more included.

The benefits of their work were greatly appreciated by the people they contacted and helped, but probably were more social, even societal, than commercial for the railway company. If the criteria for judging success are enhanced well-being and improved social inclusion, they were successful. It is less certain that they increased profits for the employing railway company. The sudden demise of the scheme and the way it quickly undid all the work and trust they had built up over several years highlights the vulnerability of pioneering schemes in today's harsh economic climate and the need for monitoring to evaluate such schemes in terms relevant for the decision-makers.

5 References

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