

The Development of the Guest Satisfaction Survey for Caledonian Sleeper

Toby Cotton, Transport Focus and Claire Bradley, Serco Caledonian Sleeper

Summary

Overnight trains have been running between Scotland and London since 1873, most recently known as the 'Caledonian Sleeper' (Meara, 2018). In 2015 the Caledonian Sleeper became a separate rail franchise for the first time. Several methods of consumer insight were incorporated in the franchise agreement. After running the service for the first year, it became apparent that the Caledonian Sleeper's insight requirements were different from those of day train services and an independent review of insight was conducted by Transport Focus at Serco Caledonian Sleeper's request. It was recommended that the main survey be altered to incorporate emotional and hospitality factors in addition to the more rational ones. Qualitative research was undertaken to understand these factors in more detail. This research showed that guests viewed the ideal experience as a combination of being relaxed, comfortable, having a good night's sleep and being welcomed and looked after. It was therefore clear that the survey needed to include the experiential side of travelling, alongside the standard rail measures which were included for benchmarking purposes. Transport Focus developed the survey and following cognitive testing, the survey went live in June 2017. The aim was to ensure that there was a good set of data before the new trains came into service, thus enabling a comparison of travelling on the new versus old rolling stock. The survey also enables Caledonian Sleeper to understand strengths and address weaknesses of the service.

1 Background

1.1 Caledonian Sleeper

The Caledonian Sleeper is an overnight train service between Scotland and London, with five departures from stations in Scotland each night and two departures from central London (Figure 1). During the night, the trains split/join accordingly. The northbound Highlander departs London at approximately 9pm and has final destinations of Inverness, Aberdeen and Fort William. The northbound Lowlander departs shortly before midnight, having final destinations of Glasgow and Edinburgh. The southbound equivalent trains join up before arriving in London at approximately 7am and 8am. In total the trains call at 48 stations, 43 of which are in Scotland. They are the longest passenger trains in the UK with 16 carriages leaving London, totalling 370m.

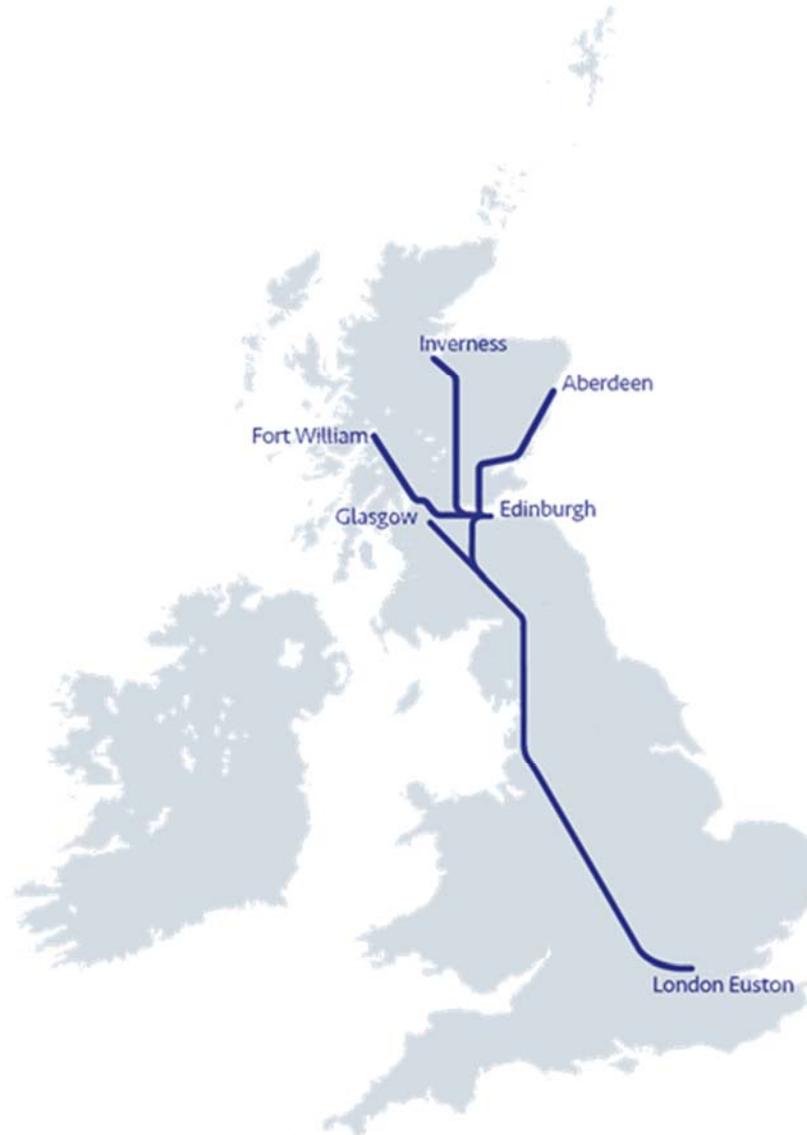


Figure 1: Caledonian Sleeper route map

Up until 2015, the Caledonian Sleeper had been incorporated into a larger rail franchise. The Scottish Government decided to let the Caledonian Sleeper as a separate franchise in order for more focus to be placed upon it. 'It is our ambition that the services offered – in terms of quality, catering and hospitality – are emblematic of the best of Scotland' (Transport Scotland n.d.). Serco was awarded a 15 year franchise by the Scottish Government in 2015, thus forming the UK's smallest franchise (Serco Caledonian Sleeper, SCS).

When the franchise began, the rolling stock was between 35 and 45 years old. There were three types of accommodation: seats, First Class rooms for solo occupancy and Standard Class rooms with bunk beds. Each train also has a Lounge Car serving a selection of food and drink. By the summer of 2019, the entire fleet will have been replaced. There are four types of accommodation on the new trains: seats, Classic rooms, Club rooms with en-suite and Caledonian Double rooms. The new Lounge Cars, which will be known as Club Cars, have better equipped galleys and will be able to offer a wider range of food and drink, incorporating Scottish produce.

1.2 Caledonian Sleeper Insight

The franchise agreement contains various specifications in order to collate consumer insight on the service, with one of the key methods being a survey which mirrors the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS); the primary tool used for measuring passenger satisfaction across train networks in Britain. After operating the service for just over a year, it became clear to SCS that the insight specified by the franchise agreement needed to be part of a larger portfolio. SCS commissioned customer panels in order to better understand their guests, and also a brand tracker survey to understand the brand's placement. The customer panels were conducted with the aim of understanding the relationship between the Caledonian Sleeper's guests and the service. It became clear from the various sources of data, that the insight portfolio might need amending. The Caledonian Sleeper is clearly a hospitality experience and this was not reflected fully in the NRPS style survey. SCS therefore commissioned Transport Focus (TF) to review the insight portfolio and make recommendations for the future.

2 Development of the survey: moving from passenger to guest satisfaction

2.1 Research Review

At the end of 2016 Transport Focus began an assessment of the various methodologies which were being used by SCS to collect insight on the service offered by the Caledonian Sleeper. Ultimately the aim of the review was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the portfolio, and to make recommendations for an optimised performance measurement regime. The review concluded that while the portfolio was working well in many ways, it was limited in terms of delivering very standardised and robust measures of performance. The review also concluded that the research portfolio would be enhanced if it enabled SCS to have a better understanding of the profile of Caledonian Sleeper guests.

As indicated, central to the franchise specifications for collecting customer insight relating to the Caledonian Sleeper is a survey exercise which mirrors the approach of the NRPS. The NRPS, which is managed by Transport Focus, provides a network wide measure of passenger satisfaction with rail services, and represents an official statistic which is used as a measure of franchise performance for train networks across Britain. This being the case, the choice to use this type of exercise in order to benchmark the Caledonian Sleeper against other long-distance train services appears on the face of it to be a reasonable one.

As a method to benchmark 'standard' train services against one another, the NRPS questionnaire places a focus on those factors which are usually considered to be important to those who travel by train. Amongst other measures, those of the punctuality and the reliability of the train service used are therefore given prominence, as is a measure of 'overall satisfaction'. The research review found that while it would be important to retain a measurement of these rational factors, a more bespoke version of the survey should also consider those things which relate to the more emotional and hospitality focussed parts of the experience of using the Sleeper.

2.2 Qualitative Research

2.2.1 Overview of research: qualitative methodologies

In February 2017 Transport Focus commissioned the independent research agency Quadrangle to undertake qualitative research with both those who had travelled on Caledonian Sleeper train services, and those who had yet to do so. Through this research Transport Focus aimed to generate a deeper understanding of the nature of the guest experience, and to understand what aspects of the service are most important in making the Sleeper experience unique. The overall objective being to enable the development of a guest satisfaction survey better tailored to the Caledonian Sleeper service.

Participants in the research included a mix of frequent, infrequent and prospective users of the Caledonian Sleeper. Participants were also split between those who were or could be travelling for different reasons; that is for commuting, business, or for leisure travel. The spread of guests who took part in the research covered those travelling First and Standard class, and those travelling alone or with other adults or children. Several guests with disabilities were also included in the research. Interviews were conducted in London, Inverness and Edinburgh and covered both the Highlander and Lowlander routes.

Quadrangle used a combination of three approaches to explore guest perceptions: the completion of 30 in-situ intercepts whereby guests were recruited and interviewed on the trains themselves, 4 focus groups at which pre-recruited guests, and separately prospective guests, discussed their expectations of the service and, where relevant, how this compared to their actual experience, and 14 online interviews where guests reported their views while travelling through the use of an application downloaded to their mobile devices.

Through the in-situ and online app-based interviews we were able to collect thoughts and feelings about using the Caledonian Sleeper as they occurred to the guests. Conversely, during focus groups more considered opinions were gathered which could be used to examine the motivations for continued use of the Sleeper among guests, or to examine the reasons for possible initial use among those who had not considered or rejected this way of travelling to Scotland. Online app-based interviews were followed up with brief telephone interviews which also allowed these guests to reflect more broadly on their experience.

2.2.2 Research findings

The research indicated that use of the Caledonian Sleeper is driven by considerations of both a practical and an emotional nature, and that the weight assigned to each of these types of judgement relates to prior experience of using the Caledonian Sleeper or other similar types of overnight train, and the reason for making the specific journey.

Practical considerations regarding whether to use Sleeper services to travel to Scotland particularly concern weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the scheduling of services, and the cost of using the Sleeper as it compares to the other options which might be available. In terms of the alternative arrangements against which use of the Sleeper competes, the research found that it compares in travellers' minds against using daytime trains and flying, with coach only being considered as a last option and driving considered only when having a car available to use is essential.

The scheduling of Sleeper services plays an important role in travellers' considerations, with the late departure and early arrival of the train in many cases being regarded as advantageous. This advantage applies, for example, to business travellers who want to be at home or to work late in the evening before travelling, or for those who must make an appointment early in the morning. Travel during the night is also considered to be a benefit by many as it precludes the need to account for the cost of a hotel and,

for leisure travellers, holiday time is not 'wasted' in getting to or from Scotland. In terms of scheduling, it is notable that the research indicated that the punctuality and reliability of the train are, particularly for business travellers, basic expectations which are largely met, albeit with some being inconvenienced by late arrival. For other types of traveller the issue of timing is more nuanced. Those using the service for leisure reasons to Edinburgh or Glasgow particularly can find the early arrival to be prohibitive, and some indicate that a longer journey time would be appreciated.

While the practical considerations relating to Sleeper use are important, the extent to which travellers simply enjoy the experience of using the Sleeper train is highly influential in the decision-making process. The qualitative research indicated that overall there are some key components which relate to the quality of the experience of using the Sleeper, and that small things which impact positively or negatively on these elements determine how the Sleeper is perceived. Participants in the research reported that being made to feel welcomed and looked after is an important aspect of the experience, as is the extent to which they are made to feel relaxed and comfortable through the full process of booking and making the journey. It is the consideration of these aspects of the service which indicate that the Sleeper is offering its guests a full hospitality experience, rather than just transporting them from a to b. Lastly having a good night's sleep was identified as a key factor influencing repeated use of the Sleeper.

The research found that for some, travelling on the Sleeper represents a 'must try' experience, while for others, notably prospective users, it is difficult to imagine what using a sleeper train will be like. This means that for many the decision to travel on the Caledonian Sleeper involves an emotional element over and above the quality of the experience itself, which relates to the expectation of what such a unique service will deliver. For these travellers then the 'emotional hook' of the service being 'a distinctive way to travel to/from Scotland, and to wake up in beautiful Scotland/vibrant London' determines the expectation to which the actual experience is compared. Those parts of the Caledonian Sleeper experience which deliver this expectation are likely to be rated positively, whereas those which do not meet this standard are likely to be viewed more negatively.

Considering their expectations of what the Caledonian Sleeper experience should deliver, and the standards of hospitality which should be met, research participants reported that there are opportunities for improvement. It was noted that the age and therefore overall quality of the rolling stock has been an issue in meeting guest expectation, particularly in relation to how this affects the experience of the room, the ability to relax and the quality of sleep achieved while on-board. The age of the rolling stock was also seen to be a factor affecting experience of the Lounge Car, which was mentioned as a focal-point encapsulating some of the essential nature of the Sleeper experience. The role of staff in delivering the experience was also mentioned, specifically in relation to the way in which staff greet and provide information to people on arrival at the departure station and when they get on board the train. Similarly, research participants felt that how they were welcomed to their destination and the way in which they were treated by staff on leaving the service was important in giving the impression of a full hospitality experience.

2.3 Development of the Guest Satisfaction Survey

In May 2017 Transport Focus developed a new Guest Satisfaction Survey which would incorporate the findings of the review of the SCS research portfolio and the qualitative investigation of the guest experience. Directed by this insight Transport Focus aimed to produce an improved measurement tool which would include three key aspects. Firstly, the survey questionnaire would retain, for benchmarking purposes, measures of the rational aspects of the service offered, such as a measure of the perceived punctuality and reliability of the train, the value for money of the service offered, and a score for overall satisfaction with the service. Secondly, it would include key measures of the more emotional aspects of the experience, align experience against expectation, and frame the assessment of the Caledonian Sleeper more in terms of the train as a hospitality offering. Lastly, the questionnaire and survey approach

more generally would seek to develop a better understanding of the profile of Caledonian Sleeper guests.

In terms of interviewing approach, the survey had always differed from the NRPS in that all interviews had been completed online, rather than most of the data being collected using a paper self-completion methodology. Unlike other train services, tickets for the Sleeper tend to be booked online in advance of travelling, providing advantages to using online methods of data collection over distributing paper surveys at stations for completion during the journey. For the NRPS, contacting the majority of train users necessarily requires approaching them physically, whereas a survey of the Caledonian Sleeper has the advantage of the availability of almost a full list of guests some time before any journey has been made. Details collected through the booking process, which include those related to the journey itself alongside the guest contact information, can be appended to the final data and used to analyse results by customer segment without having to be collected via the survey questionnaire.

Information about the journeys being made can also be used advantageously during the stage of selecting which guests' journeys are surveyed. The new survey builds upon this advantage so that rather than selecting which journeys to follow-up at purely at random, the full list is stratified by service date, direction of travel, and by route before a one-in-n selection process takes place. By using this system, the final sample of journeys selected for follow-up reflects the profile of the full list and, subject to some non-response bias, ensures that results are more likely to be accurate.

By SCS supplying the details of those who are travelling by Caledonian Sleeper to Transport Focus on a weekly basis, Transport Focus can contact guests by email very soon after their journey has taken place. This means that the whole journey experience can be accounted for while the experience is still fresh in the minds of guests. The questionnaire is optimised so that it can be completed using either a PC or a smartphone. Routing is built into the survey so that responses can be followed-up with subsequent questions which are relevant to the specific guest's experience. Survey results are also returned in a format which means that reports can be collated rapidly at the end of each rail period. SCS can therefore monitor results as the survey progresses and can be made aware of the 'direction of travel' of key performance indicators throughout the year.

The ability to benchmark performance is a key aim of the survey, with a specific emphasis being placed on being able to measure the impact of the introduction of new rolling stock on guests' experience of the service. As indicated, in the NRPS a measure of 'overall satisfaction' with the service is given prominence as a benchmarking tool, and so this question was retained in the new Guest Satisfaction Survey. The inclusion of this measure ensures continuity both between the old and the new versions of the survey itself, and between measurements of the Caledonian Sleeper and those of other train services. Alongside overall satisfaction, rational measures of the service, such as its reliability and punctuality and the value for money offered were included as hygiene factors to ensure that the Caledonian Sleeper continues to deliver the more basic requirements.

While benchmarking the experience in terms of overall satisfaction is important, the qualitative research suggested that a different approach to assessing the overall hospitality experience might also be adopted by the new survey. For this reason, the new survey sought to include an overall measure of the Sleeper experience relating more closely to the hospitality offering over and above the functions of a basic train journey. A question which asks guests to express their view on the overall experience of using the Sleeper in terms of a one to five-star rating scale was used as an alternative to the traditional overall satisfaction question with its usual ordinal scale. This type of star rating is frequently adopted in the hospitality sector and it was felt that this would be familiar to Caledonian Sleeper guests assessing the service in this context. The star-rating scale was also applied to questions asking about other aspects of the journey experience, for instance the quality of the lounge at the departure station and of the Lounge Car on the train itself. Similarly, the scale is used to rate the experience of the room, the quality of the food and drink offering and the quality of the staffing on the service.

Further questions, going beyond a rating of the services offered and focusing on the more emotional aspects of the experience, were also developed for the new survey. In line with the findings from the qualitative research the new survey includes questions which ask guests to rate the degree to which they were made to feel welcomed, looked-after, comfortable and relaxed during their journey. These questions also incorporate the one to five-star rating scale which is used in the survey elsewhere. Likewise reflecting the findings of the qualitative research, guests are asked questions which allow us to quantify the extent to which use of the Sleeper is being based upon practical considerations against those of a more emotional nature. Specifically, guests are asked to choose between several words and phrases which might best describe their initial thoughts and feelings before using the service, and also to choose between descriptions of the experience as a whole. The degree to which the experience was felt to have met the expectations of the guest is also collected via a more formal question of this nature, and this rating can be assessed in terms of the number of times that the guest has used the Sleeper previously which is collected in a more complete customer profiling section of the questionnaire.

Prior to launching the new Guest Satisfaction Survey, the revised questionnaire was checked during a period of cognitive testing. For this exercise a small number of Caledonian Sleeper guests were asked to complete the survey and to make comments while a researcher observed this process. Guests who were involved, indicated that they felt the layout, tone, and 'feel' of the survey to be appropriate, and that they found it to be a comprehensive measure of their satisfaction with the service which was offered. Specifically, the guests found the use of star-ratings to be appropriate given the context and said that they could see why a rating of this nature was being used. Several small changes to the survey were suggested. For example, participants suggested that some of the wording in the survey invitation could be made clearer, and also that the descriptions presented as ways in which to describe thoughts and feelings prior to using the train, and to describe using the Sleeper overall, could be amended to better reflect their experience. After making these changes the Guest Satisfaction Survey was launched in June 2017.

3 Conclusions

The review of insight clearly demonstrated that the franchise insight portfolio needed amending, in particular the guest survey. It was evident that there are notable differences between the Caledonian Sleeper and daytime train services and that therefore the survey needed to measure the hospitality aspect of the service. The new Guest Satisfaction Survey gives a full and detailed view of the guest's journey and it means that the improvements the new rolling stock bring will be able to be seen clearly. It also enables SCS to identify strengths and improve on any areas of weakness. It gives SCS a deeper understanding of who their guests are and thus build a segmentation. In the future there are sure to be many additional ways that SCS will be able to use the data, based on its comprehensive nature.

4 References

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