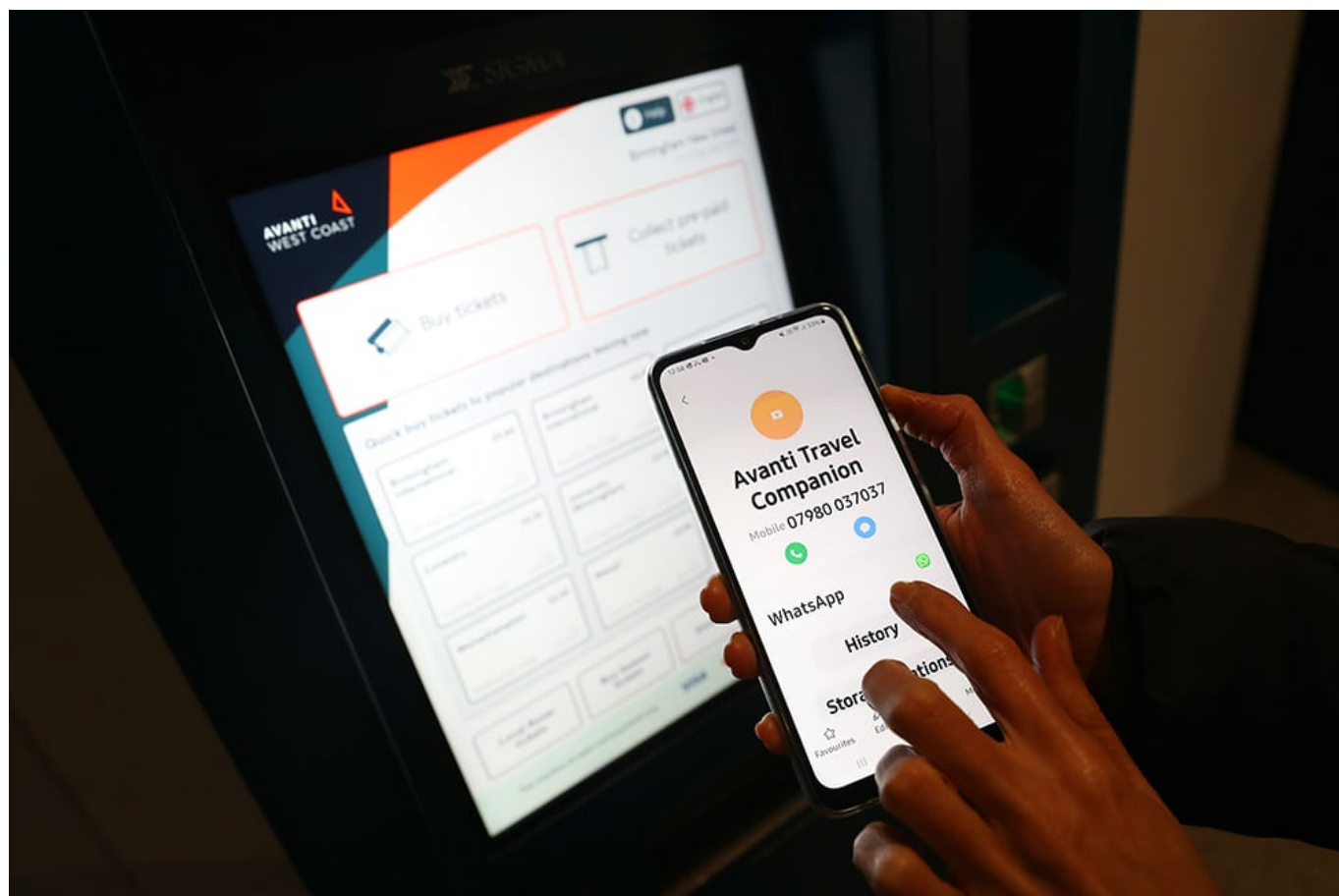


Avanti West Coast teams up with tech provider, Be My Eyes, in first for transport industry

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Avanti West Coast has launched a dedicated communications channel to provide disabled customers with instant help during their journey in a first for the UK rail industry.

Called 'Travel Companion', the channel utilises the widely used messaging app, WhatsApp, to connect passengers on the West Coast Main Line to someone with similar experience who can offer specialist support while travelling.

Staffed by specialist members of Avanti West Coast's social media team who have passion and empathy for accessibility, as well as knowledge of it, Travel Companion aims to improve journeys when the unexpected happens by giving disabled customers the opportunity to chat to someone that really understands.

This means they don't have to explain in detail what support they need – making it a better experience for the customer.

Whether it's a lift suddenly out of order, or a wheelchair user needing help from a Train Manager while onboard, customers can reach out for extra assistance by messaging Avanti West Coast Travel Companion on WhatsApp. A member of the team will then exchange messages with the customer to check their needs and help in a way that's right for them.

As part of the launch of the dedicated channel, the train operator has recruited Martin Byrne and Ricky West as Accessibility Social Media Executives, both of whom have first-hand knowledge of accessibility, to lead on assisting people in times of need.

To support blind or partially-sighted people, the intercity operator has also teamed up with technology provider, Be My Eyes – a free app offering video support at a moment's notice from sighted volunteers and professionals who lend their eyes to solve tasks. This collaboration means customers using Travel Companion have the option to use the Be My Eyes app to ask for assistance on queries that may not be easily communicated via text alone, such as their location onboard a train or at a station, which ticket to present for their journey or even reading the label on food items.

By gathering all the details of the situation direct from the customer, the social media team can identify and explain the options available, so issues or questions can be resolved quickly.

Staff have received disability awareness and inclusion training to help them better understand challenges faced by disabled people and consider the ways they can best support those who need extra assistance.

Travel Companion is ultimately designed to be a safety net for any disabled customers travelling on the west coast – a resource they can rely on for extra help if the unexpected happens and they cannot find assistance from a member of staff themselves.

It is the latest initiative by the long-distance operator to change communication with disabled customers and enable independent travel – by offering an opportunity for in the moment dialogue with accessible travel experts when things do not go to plan. The channel follows the introduction of the dedicated social media forum – Accessible Rail Travel with Avanti West Coast – on Facebook in 2021. This is aimed at disabled customers planning or making journeys so they can receive hints and tips, as well as interact with people who have a shared understanding.

Travel Companion uses an internet connection making the dedicated support accessible to anyone, anywhere on the west coast route through WiFi at stations, onboard, or using a small amount of mobile data.

Brandon Peat, Accessibility and Inclusion Manager at Avanti West Coast, said: “We know the value of creating a dialogue with those who have a shared understanding, which is why we've launched Travel Companion to connect our disabled customers with accessible travel experts during their journey.

“Through the use of accessible technology, our partnership with Be My Eyes, and first-hand knowledge from our people, we want to build a rapport with our disabled customers, so we can assist them in the best possible way.

“By providing a dedicated channel, we hope those who may need additional assistance are reassured they can get that bit of extra help when they need it, as well as give them more confidence to make journeys independently.”

Avanti West Coast will work with members of its industry leading national and regional accessibility panels to shape Travel Companion and make it as accessible as possible, while being suitable for those travelling on its network.

Tony Jennings, Co-Chair of Avanti West Coast’s external Accessibility Panel, said: “Travel Companion will improve ‘live’ communications for disabled customers and give confidence to travel on their end-to-end journey. Knowing that trained staff can be communicated with via WhatsApp, for missed Passenger Assistance or communication with onboard staff, will be incredibly helpful. This new service can make a huge difference to a customer’s experience when travelling with Avanti West Coast.”

Hans Jørgen Wiberg, Founder of Be My Eyes Be My Eyes, said: “Our partnership with Avanti West Coast is a further step into a more accessible and inclusive travel experience for millions of blind and low vision individuals. This is the first time a transportation company joins Be My Eyes Specialized Help and we are all so excited about this opportunity.”

Photo credit: Avanti West Coast