

Journey4 and GBRTT put customers first

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How GBRTT offers the industry a once-in-a-generation opportunity to put the customer before everything else

As the Great British Railways Transition Team (GBRTT) prepares its 30-year strategy for UK rail, newly appointed Customer Programme Director, Charlene Wallace, is working to ensure that customer-centricity remains high on the agenda.

Charlene holds a permanent post as Director of Customer and Freight at Network Rail. In her new role, she will lead efforts to drive change across the sector, helping it to adopt a customer-led approach.

Charlene is working closely with customer-focussed growth consultancy Journey4 and its director, Jonathan Booth. Together, they hope to gain a better understanding of rail users, with a view to meeting their changing needs, delivering exceptional service, and encouraging more people to engage with railways.

Learning from the past

Charlene acknowledges that, historically, the industry has struggled to deliver a consistent customer experience.

“While it would be remiss to say that we are not customer focussed, we have had an inconsistent customer offering throughout the network,” she said. “You can catch two or three trains over the course of one journey and have a very different experience on each one. Internal transport links are all part of the journey too, and it needs to be joined up.”

The issue, Jonathan added, is a lack of consensus about what constitutes good service.

“There is currently no guiding principle or industry standard about what ‘good’ looks like,” he explained. “Agreeing minimum standards are part of customer-led thinking.”

This inconsistency was particularly apparent at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when operators responded differently to new safety measures.

“There was some great work done, often with a lot of consistency,” Charlene said. “The same customer information was given to every station but how they applied that was a little different given their setup and circumstances, although the information was clear it could have been confusing to customers who don’t travel that often.”

Indeed, Charlene and Jonathan agree that, while examples of best practice can be found at operator level, a lack of overall consistency has led to variable customer experience and satisfaction levels.

“Some train operating companies (TOCs) have done exceptional work,” Charlene commented. “The industry should be celebrating that.”

However, failure to deliver nationwide initiatives effectively, coupled with the prioritising of capacity over customer experience, has undermined passenger trust. Jonathan and Charlene believe that adopting a customer-led approach will enable the industry to address these issues.

Time for a customer-led approach

Jonathan added that now is the right time to embrace customer-led thinking – not least because, in the wake of the pandemic, rail users’ behaviours have changed.

“People are less forgiving, and the industry needs to start delivering on its promises,” he explained. “They understand that, with reduced demand, we had time to do things during the pandemic.”

National lockdowns, and the introduction of remote working, also gave commuters time to reflect.

“Customer experience is shaped by expectations,” he said. “People had a summer working at home, with no commute. It made them evaluate what they want from a service, and many began relying on their cars, which were clean and private.”

Meeting these expectations and bringing commuters back to railways is a key concern for GBRTT and Journey4, as is communicating the environmental benefits of rail travel.

“There is now an environmental agenda, and rail is the obvious solution. We need to grasp that in the industry,” Charlene commented.

The duo agree that the pandemic accelerated customer-led change and are keen to avoid losing momentum.

Changing expectations and behaviour

Jonathan firmly believes that to maintain this momentum and deliver meaningful change, the industry must gain a better understanding of its customers.

“The sector thinks it knows its customers, but it needs to really look at the people, and who is using the service,” he said. “Different groups will have different expectations, and segmentation is key.”

These differences can be generational, and Jonathan and Charlene are keen to improve accessibility across the network. The population has more access to technology, which is something the sector has been slow to embrace. Some young people may choose to fly between cities rather than catch a train and understanding their needs will enable the rail industry to compete.

The needs of business commuters have also changed, with many working remotely and travelling to the workplace on set days.

“If you’re working on a train, you need consistent Wifi,” Charlene added. “We haven’t cracked that yet. And it isn’t just business travellers – what about a family with iPads?”

Opportunities for the industry

Charlene and Jonathan believe that, by engaging with and understanding its customers, UK rail can deliver the kind of seamless, personalised service that other sectors already offer. This, in turn, will encourage new customers and existing passengers to use railways.

“We want to engage people who haven’t travelled by train, and understand why they aren’t using them,” explained Jonathan. “We can then work on and differentiate our approach, to get people to choose rail. It needs to be easier, simpler, and better.”

This kind of customer-led thinking will also enable the rail industry to refresh and improve its image.

“We want to make sure that people see the possibilities of rail, and how it can still fit into their lives,” Charlene added.

Their focus is not restricted to passengers, and both acknowledge the importance of the freight sector.

“It did very well during the pandemic, and is a huge customer,” Charlene said. “We need to make sure that freight doesn’t feel forgotten, and to build those relationships too.”

Next steps

Journey4 will work closely with GBRTT to help it achieve industry-wide customer centricity.

“To get the customer philosophy right for rail, we need to agree on minimum standards, and get buy-in from the entire sector,” Jonathan explained. “We’ve got to get customer-thinking embedded in everything, from station design to rolling stock. The focus should always be, what’s the best outcome for the customer?”

Looking ahead, Charlene added, “It’s a work in progress, and the next step will be to get like-minded individuals together in the room. We will then start working groups to get ideas down, involving key-decision makers.”

Understanding customers is integral to the process, and GBRTT is already consulting industry stakeholders to develop a new segmentation model. It is also working on a new customer insight survey, with support from Journey4.

Both Charlene and Jonathan are excited about the challenge ahead, with Charlene concluding, “We have to go forward as an industry. This is a big opportunity, and we’re working with fantastic people. It’s the biggest transformation in 30 years.”

Find out more about Journey4 at: <https://www.journey4.co.uk/>