

# Why clean is the new safe for rail travel

January 18, 2022



*A pandemic and the Plan for Rail reforms mean tidiness is no longer a luxury. In an article written for Rail Business Daily, Toby Hawkins – sales and marketing director for mpro5 – explains how it will have a real impact on customer safety, satisfaction, and the Service Quality Regimes.*

Imagine you're on a train back in 2019. Your seat feels a bit sticky. There's a half-eaten sandwich on the table opposite. And you'd rather not think what's smeared on that window. It's all a little ... grubby. But the dirt doesn't bother you too much because that's all it is – dirt. It won't hurt anyone, and it's just one of those things you sometimes get with public transport and its facilities.

Now visualise the same experience today. It feels different, doesn't it? The dirt is no longer just dirt – it's a hazard and represents the potential presence of a more invisible, viral enemy. Ultimately, if your train carriage is grubby, it can't have been sanitised recently – and so alarm bells go off inside your head.

This doesn't just make for an uncomfortable journey for passengers; it also risks impacting a Train Operating Company's (TOC) bottom line – and not just due to lost customers. Thanks to the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail, and the impending Service Quality Regimes (SQRs) against which they'll be measured, customer experience will be at the heart of the financial reward structure of our rail network.

## **Covid and the new passenger mindset**

A rampant infection rate and recommendations to work from home are, of course, the main reason that train usage is low at the moment. However, if and when people deem public transport, office work, and busy leisure activities are worth the risk, the number of customers will spike – as it has done in the past when infections are low. Their satisfaction, and therefore their enthusiasm to ride the rails again, will be closely linked to perceived levels of cleanliness and the danger of infection.

At the height of the pandemic, it made short-term sense to hire more staff to clean more often. However, with skyrocketing staff absences and many vacancies across all industries, throwing extra people at the problem is no longer sustainable.

## **Cleaning up wasteful processes with tech and data**

Let's take station toilets as a current example of cleaning inefficiency. Toilets are checked and cleaned on a time-defined schedule, which could be hourly for staffed stations or three times a week for unstaffed.

It's easy to see why those facilities would need special care in Covid times and beyond. Toilet presentation is what sticks in the mind of any customer in any facility – and used as a benchmark to assess the overall cleanliness and quality of their experience. Yet, is it sensible to send cleaners even though nothing's changed since their last visit, and their presence is adding no value? In less busy stations, only a few people could use the facilities in several hours – and in peak times, several hundred could descend upon them.

With the right station monitoring, you can pinpoint where your cleaners' efforts are most needed. By blending real-time data with information gathered from planned general inspections, service quality audits and the like, you can prioritise and assign tasks to the right people at the right time. This reduces inefficiencies and eliminates wasted work while actively driving improvements in passenger experience.

You might find, for example, that your cleaners' time could be better spent wiping down frequently used handrails, escalators, and counters or focussing on areas such as brightwork and ticket machines. These are all highly visible to passengers. And when they sparkle, it sends a subconscious message: this company cares, I'm safe on their services, and I won't have an issue using them again.

## **Remove fear, build trust, increase satisfaction**

Breaking down that fear barrier will be key to getting people back on the trains regularly. Customer satisfaction will increasingly be defined by how safe people feel – and their feelings of safety will be heavily influenced by the cleanliness of their surroundings. It will also have a far-reaching impact on TOC's finances thanks to SQRs and the Williams-Shapps reforms.

By using tech and data to deploy resources smartly, and anticipate and solve problems proactively, they have the chance to stay one step ahead of the auditors. This, in turn, will build an organisational culture of

continuous improvement, customer care and – you guessed it – cleanliness.

Ultimately, when your facilities feel clean, your passengers will feel safe, and the auditors will be happy. All of this means higher footfall, better ratings, and a tastier profit as a reward.