

## Two train companies that sell cheap fares on board are most popular

Ben Webster, Transport Correspondent

RECOMMEND? (1)

Two small train companies that have revived British Rail's policy of selling cheap tickets on board are easily the most popular with passengers, according to a government-commissioned survey.

The findings indicate that passengers want simpler fares and resent being forced to commit themselves to specific trains several weeks in advance to get cheap deals.

Passengers travelling on Wrexham & Shropshire or Grand Central were twice as likely as the national average to think their fare was good value.

These companies have abolished the principle, introduced at privatisation, that the cheapest deals must be booked well in advance. They have also rejected the practice of imposing penalty fares on people who are running late and do not have time to buy a ticket before boarding.

Most train companies, including Virgin and National Express East Coast, charge several times as much for the same journey if the passenger tries to buy on the day as opposed to booking.

They also refuse to take into account what the passenger has already paid if they miss their booked train and catch a later one. In those cases, the companies charge the full fare and may refuse to give railcard discounts.

Wrexham & Shropshire and Grand Central let people buy tickets on board for the same price. They have a simple fares structure with only one or two prices depending on the time of day, unlike the rest of the industry where passengers must choose between up to 40 prices, all with different and confusing restrictions.

Passenger Focus, the rail watchdog, which was paid by the Department for Transport to question 26,000 rail users, found that 84 per cent of Wrexham & Shropshire passengers and 74 per cent of Grand Central passengers were satisfied with the value for money of their ticket. Across the rest of the industry, only 40 per cent were satisfied.

Among National Express East Anglia passengers, only 28 per cent believed their tickets represented value for money.

In the ratings for overall satisfaction with the service, Wrexham & Shropshire scored 97 per cent and Grand Central 94 per cent. The average for the rest of the industry was 81 per cent, up 1 per cent on last year.

In April, Sir Richard Branson, Virgin's chairman, abandoned a plan to compete directly with Wrexham & Shropshire after *The Times* disclosed that the move could force the small company out of business.

Anthony Smith, the chief executive of Passenger Focus, said: "The clear message from this survey is that passengers prefer simple, affordable fares which they can buy on board without risk of being

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of London, was Britain's most unpopular major station. Only 28 per cent rated it as good compared with 95 per cent for St Pancras, which reopened in 2007 after an £800 million refit and which is the terminus for Eurostar, Midland Main Line and Kent high-speed trains.

Satisfaction with punctuality on the West Coast Main Line has slumped in the past year after Network Rail failed to deliver the improvements promised by its £9 billion modernisation of the route.

For Virgin Trains — the main user of the West Coast line — satisfaction with punctuality and reliability fell 6 per cent to 79 per cent in the period spring 2008 to spring 2009.

The punctuality and reliability satisfaction level for passengers on the services of London Midland, which also operates on the West Coast line, fell 8 per cent to 70 per cent.

Across the network, the lowest satisfaction ratings were for how train companies dealt with delays (35 per cent), and lavatory facilities (36 per cent).

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