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Enhancing the experience of the train journey: changing the focus from satisfaction to emotional experience of customers

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Abstract

Every railway operator should see and recognize the importance of the customer as its most crucial asset. Without the customer, there is no license to operate. As railway operators are often held internally and externally accountable for their services, customer satisfaction surveys are conducted to determine, amongst other things, the scores for (aspects of the) service. At NS these scores are highly important and underlie goals and plans for improvement. To be successful it is essential to follow the value experienced during the entire train journey of the customer. The aim of this research was therefore to seek the emotional context, such as the customers' deeper desires, motivations and expectations and so-called 'moments of truth'. The answers to these questions would offer NS a new perspective on the services it provides and enable it to focus on those elements that truly enhance customer satisfaction.

To gain more insight into the customer experience, ultimately enabling us to act on it, the emotional journey of the respective customers was mapped in an 'emotion curve'. This curve was developed using qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with an Underlying Construct Elicitation Method (UCEM) among 27 participants (see also ETC paper of Van Hagen, Apeldoorn, Eijssink & Verhoeven, 2012). Such a journey offers insight into the peak and off-peak moments, and the customer delighters, satisfiers and dissatisfiers of train travel. We also looked for the moments of truth (essential for the brand and the customer), as these are times we can make a difference. The insights from UCEM were then tested and supplemented by an online research community which enriched the UCEM output in three phases (observation, crowd interpretation and discussion by images, blogs and customer reports), and which brought the customer experience literally to life. A total of 65 people actively participated in the community, yielding over 3600 posts with pictures and stories. The combination of both methods enabled us to generate as complete an insight as possible.

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The results of the study show that whether or not having a place to sit on the train is essential to the overall experience. Only when passengers have a good place to sit they can experience a true moment of peace and relaxation. This is currently the only peak in the emotion curve. Furthermore it appeared that the transportation to and from the station greatly influences the total experience. Travelling by bike or on foot is much more relaxed than by bus, tram or car. This gives customers the feeling that they have more freedom and control. Last but not least a real peak at the end of the journey is currently missing. Although at this point nothing is expected of NS, this is a chance to offer something that transcends expectation and which is memorable (see for example ETC paper of Lekkerkerker, Mook, Van Hagen & Van Houten, 2012).

Respondents furthermore named seven emotional themes which they felt deserved particular attention. The experience themes and emotion curve enable us to view our service provision in a new light, affording us input to address the elements that make customers enthusiastic. In other words it offers NS input to make the right (policy and investment) decisions and to adequately address our processes (doing the right things right).

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1. Introduction

Each railway company will acknowledge the importance of its customers. After all, it is they to whom they owe a right to exist and who determine the company's success. To satisfy (and keep) customers, most railway companies implement an improvement strategy for achieving operational excellence and which is closely monitored by conducting regular customer satisfaction surveys. Although such a strategy lends itself well to raising dissatisfiers to an acceptable level, it falls short when it comes to making a true breakthrough in customer satisfaction. The greater the focus and management of statistics on (operational) processes (dissatisfiers), the more one loses sight of the actual needs and emotions of the customer. This means that railway companies are unable to offer a service that has a really positive effect on customers' emotions. In order to realize a breakthrough, a paradigm shift is required, i.e. change the focus on dissatisfiers to one on satisfiers. In other words: more attention needs to be paid to the emotional experience of the customer (see ETC paper Van Hagen & De Bruyn, 2012). We are now living in an economic era in which experience plays a leading role. Characteristic of this experience economy is that everything revolves around the emotional gratification of the consumer (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, 2007). An emotional consumer is inclined to accord emotional or affective value to a product, and thus also to the experience thereof. However, before his/her emotions can be managed, a railway company must be aware of what drives the customer; only then can the emotional needs be truly and effectively addressed with an aim to increasing customer satisfaction. This paper focuses on the needs and emotions of passengers and describes a method that maps their unconscious needs and emotions during the Customer Journey.

2. Theory

2.1. *Customer needs; quality perception*

If a rail carrier aims for more and more happy customers, any improvements to the service should particularly appeal to motorists. A train journey is a service and a fundamental difference between a product and a service is that the latter is made and consumed at the same time. The consumer finds him-/herself 'on the shop floor' so to speak, and experiences the service within the physical facilities of the organization (Grönroos, 1998). On a train journey the passenger expects the carrier to be aware of his/her most important needs, such as safety, reliability, speed (travel time), ease, comfort and experience.

Analogous to Maslow's hierarchy, the various needs can be ranked according to importance in the shape of a pyramid (Maslow, 1954; Van Hagen, Peek & Kieft, 2000). The pyramid of customer needs reflects the perception of

the quality offered by the operator. The base of the pyramid is formed by the basic needs reliability and safety. For passengers, safety particularly means social safety and this is a prerequisite in the decision for choosing a travel mode. If potential customers perceive the train journey to be unsafe, they will avoid it. Reliability indicates the degree to which passengers experience receiving what they expect. If the service is not available when and where customers expect it, it will result in their being dissatisfied. This means that trains must not only run on time but also that passengers should receive information when they need it and that it is trustworthy. As already ascertained, speed is the principal customer need, i.e. the majority of customers choose as short a travel time between origin and destination as possible. If the condition of a fast journey and transfer has been complied with, then the passenger wants the trip to be easy, i.e. convenient and with little hassle. Travel information and signposting are a help and must be seen as logical and unambiguous. Also the passenger expects a certain degree of physical comfort at the station and on the train: sheltered waiting and sitting areas and food and refreshment facilities at the station and comfortable seats and the opportunity for other activities on the train. Finally, the need of a pleasant experience must be fulfilled and can be influenced by such visual aspects as architecture, design, cleanliness, used materials and colour. Besides these, however, also less tangible environmental variables, such as (day)light, smell and music can influence the quality of experience. Offering facilities such as shops and cafés and the obvious presence of staff enhance a pleasant journey. Figure 2 shows the hierarchy in interests of the various quality dimensions (Van Hagen, Peek & Kieft, 2000; Peek & Van Hagen, 2002; Van Hagen, 2011).

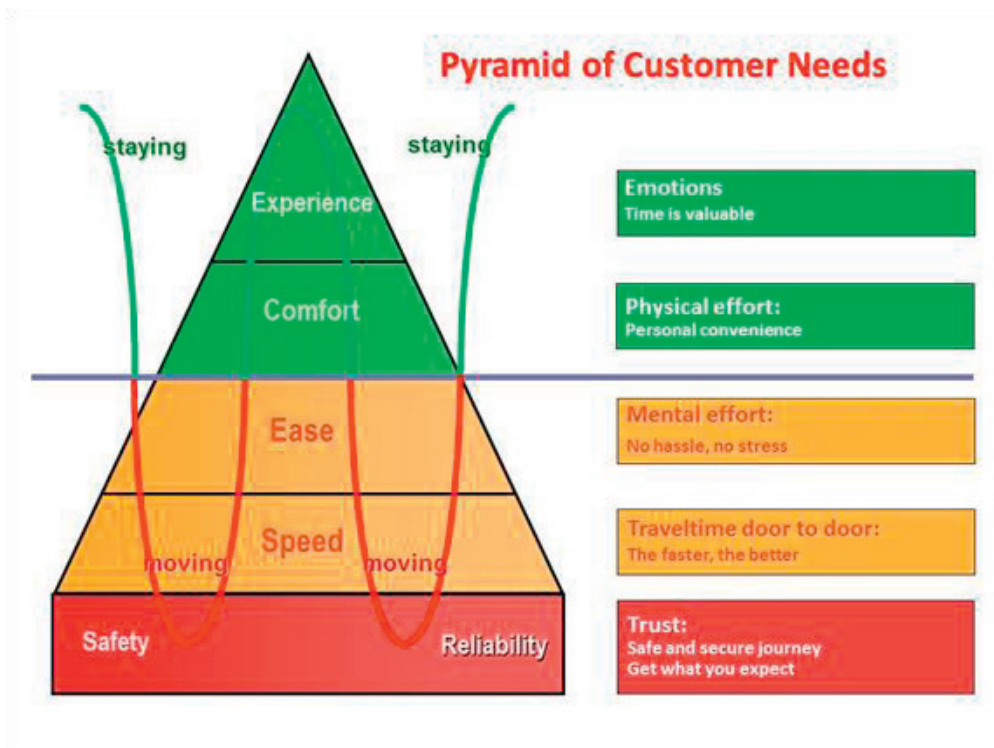


Fig. 1. Quality dimensions in order of importance.

Various transport scientists employ such a pyramid of customer needs. The interest layers of this pyramid are supported by several qualitative and quantitative studies (Peek & Van Hagen, 2003; De Bruyn & De Vries, 2009; Van Beek, 2009; Boes, 2007b; Preston, Blainey, Wall, Wardman, Chintakayala & Sheldon, 2008).

When travellers move in and out of the train or through the station, speed and ease are key, but when they sit on a moving train or have to wait at a station, then comfort and experience are vital (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994; 1999). In this respect, speed and ease are dissatisfiers (Figure 1) in that these quality aspects are rated negatively if they do not meet expectation (Herzberg, Mausner & Snyderman, 1959). All passengers set great store by a safe, reliable, easy and speedy journey. Such dimensions are the bedrock of transportation; they are generic and apply to each journey. Comfort and experience are satisfiers (Herzberg et al., 1959; Johnston, 1985). They are noticed when the journey is evaluated positively, albeit that the interpretation can vary per passenger. Just as one passenger wishes to travel first class, eat sushi at a station and admire the architecture, so is another passenger content to travel second class, eat a rissole from a vending machine and only see the station as an efficient transfer space (Van Hagen, 2011).

2.2. Customer needs and expectations

Opting for the train is based on the customer’s needs and related to his/her expectation of the train journey. The consumer’s expectation of the quality of a service acts as a criterion which is compared with the actual experience thereof (Oliver, 1981). If the experience surpasses expectation, the consumer will experience positive emotions and give the service a good evaluation (satisfied). If the experience is worse than expected, the opposite will be the case and the consumer will negatively evaluate the service (dissatisfied). The gap between expectation and experience thus determines how the service is assessed (see Gaps Model of Service Quality, Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985, 1988; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1988). Consumers take it for granted that they will receive a desired service quality but also understand that there are situations in which this cannot be offered or guaranteed. Then they accept a service that is adequate and of a level that is still found to be acceptable (albeit just), considering the investments (money, time and effort) they have made. The desired level of quality is stable and constant. These are the quality dimensions of the pyramid of customer needs. The acceptable level of quality adapts itself to the changing circumstances and is therefore flexible (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1993). The area between the desired and the accepted level of quality is the zone of tolerance.

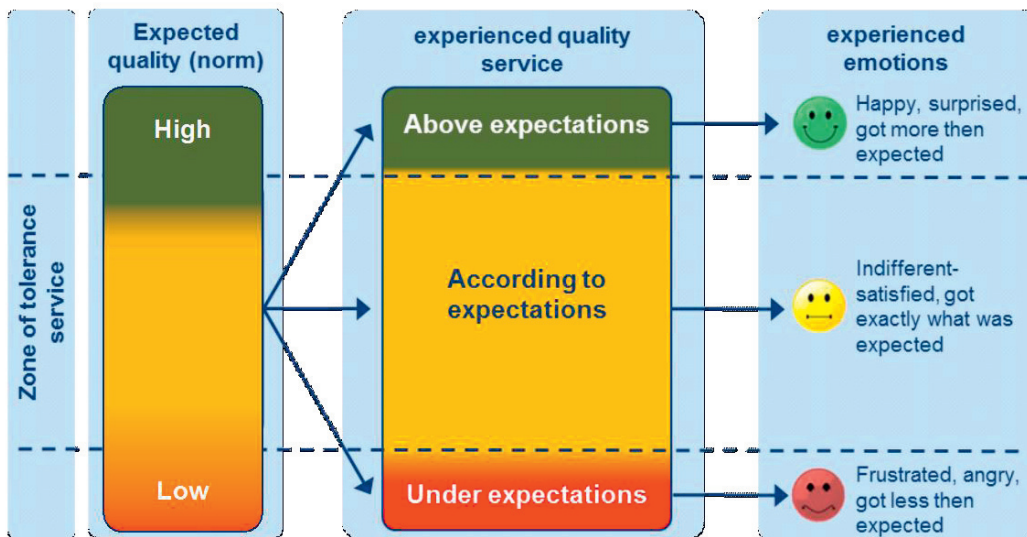


Fig. 2. Expected quality, experienced service quality and emotions.

2.3. *Seen from the perspective of the customer*

In order for a railway company to ascertain points of reference with the objective of increasing the provision of service, it is necessary that the service be viewed not only from the customers' perspective but also which emotions they experience. Customers perceive their environment holistically, i.e. as an interaction of separate dimensions within one and the same provision of service. Each aspect can directly influence the total evaluation or indirectly via the interaction with other dimensions (Bitner, 1992). In short, customers see the service of railway companies as an entity. That is why, in order to describe the service from the perspective of the customer, his/her entire door-to-door journey (i.e. Customer Journey) needs to be taken into account. A Customer Journey is a schematic representation (from the customer's perspective) of the provision of service offered by a railway company. It consists of various episodes, including corresponding moments of contact. Once this has been done, it is relevant to find out what the experience of the service was in each episode of the Customer Journey. Where, as a railway company, do you or do you not meet the customer's expectations? Answer: by recording the customers' emotions for each episode of the Customer Journey and by mapping their experiential values of the service on an emotional curve. This affords an insight into the peak and end moments in the current service and illustrates where, from the perspective of the customer, there is improvement potential.

2.4. *No pleasure without pain: the peak-end rule*

The 'peak-end rule' is a psychological phenomenon defined by psychologist and Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman. In 1993, Kahneman, Fredrickson, Schreiber and Redelmeier demonstrated in an experiment that participants preferred to put their hand in water of 14 degrees Centigrade for 60 seconds, followed by 15 degrees Centigrade for 30 seconds, than for 60 seconds only in water of 14 degrees. These findings are counter-intuitive, because water of 14 and 15 degrees Centigrade are both unpleasant. Participants thus appear to incline towards more pain (longer duration) than less. The authors suggest that the level of pain is influenced by the highest peak of experienced pain during a specific period and the last level of pain, whereby although the time is recorded it has no influence on the memory (duration neglect). The authors named this phenomenon the peak-end rule. The peak-end rule means that we evaluate experiences during a period of time particularly on the basis of two memories: during the peak and at the end. The peak is the moment people experience the strongest emotions, which may be positive or negative. Also the experience/emotion at the end is important for the overall assessment of the experience in its entirety. That most films have a happy ending has a reason. Experiences at other moments are not forgotten but are simply not included in the overall evaluation, says Kahneman (2011).

The peak-end rule was confirmed in a variety of follow-up studies with negative emotions (colonoscopy, loud noises) or positive emotions (films, presents) (Do, Rupert & Montfort, 2008; Fredrickson & Kahneman, 1993; Kahneman, 2003; Kahneman, 2000a, 2000b; Kahneman, 1999; Kahneman & Frederick, 2002; Kahneman, Frederickson, Schreiber, & Redelmeier, 1993; Kahneman, Wakker, & Sarin, 1997; Redelmeier & Kahneman, 1996; Redelmeier, Katz, & Kahneman, 2003; Schreiber & Kahneman, 2000; Varey & Kahneman, 1992).

In practice the peak-end rule is used by many companies (such as IKEA and Transavia) in their service design. One interpretation is that during the service a relevant (positive) peak is created and that the final (end) experience is just as positive. Thus, on the basis of the peak-end rule, it is not necessary to maximize the satisfaction of customers on all aspects of the service provision (i.e. not create peaks everywhere). That is not really effective and is costly. The peak-end rule demonstrates that our brain likes contrast. By allowing dips (or pain), the peak is experienced with a much greater intensity. It is more effective to optimize the so-called 'pain-pleasure gap'. This might mean consciously having to allow a temporary disappointment during the journey.

2.5. *Peak-end rule and the customer journey*

A door-to-door journey by public transport is a complex experience, one in which the experience of time plays an important role (Van Hagen, 2011). The question rises whether the peak-end rule could also be applied to a journey

by public transport, and what it would mean to customers with regard to the service. For an effective customer experience of a train journey it might be relevant to create peaks at the right moment, without optimizing any dips/ends. Memorable peak moments of a journey might be those instances that meet the strengths of the rail carrier and where crucial customer needs are present. Only then will the customer link the (positive) experience to the brand and will the rail carrier profit from it.

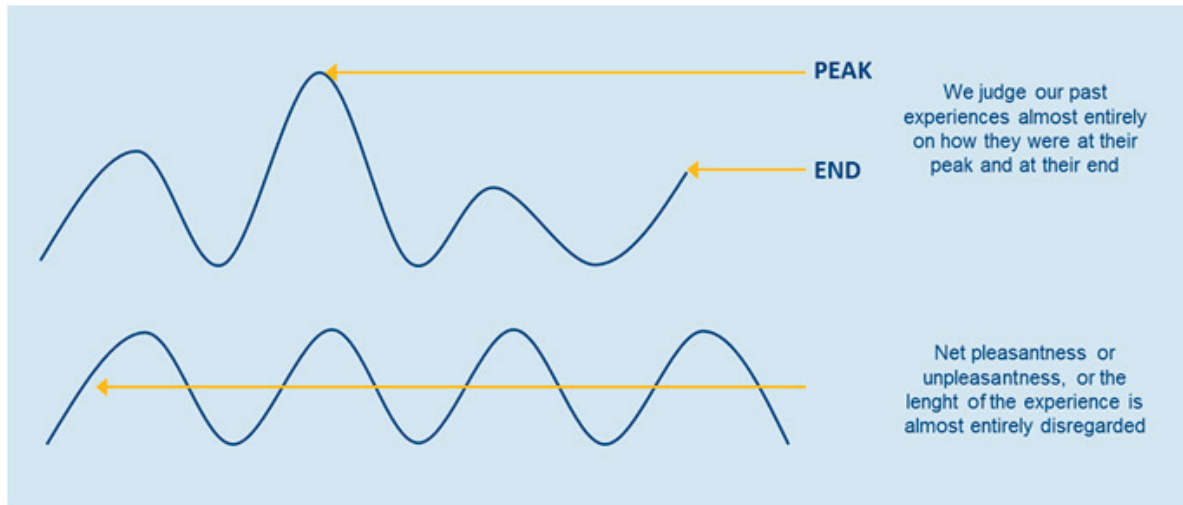


Fig. 3. The peak-end rule.

3. Research method: projective technique and community

In order to ascertain the true motives and needs of our customers, we need more than just the consumers' statements. Researchers are adamant about the fact that no less than 95% of our behaviour is unconscious and not easily accessible (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995; Zaltman, 2000). People are often unaware that the unconscious brain is accountable for this and will thus come up with (unrealistic) arguments later to rationalize and explain their unconscious needs.

To explore the (unconscious) needs, wishes, associations and motives of customers, we applied the qualitative ZMET technique. This was developed at Harvard by Dr Gerald Zaltman (hence the Zaltman Metaphor Eliciting Technique). This technique was developed to fathom the unconscious, emotional customer experience and we used it to uncover the deeper motives of customers, the emotional peak and end moments within the Customer Journey and the Moments of Truth. The Moments of Truth are those instances when customer expectations are high and which overlap with the (potential) strengths or promise of the railway company (see ETC paper Van Hagen, Apeldoorn, Eijnsink & Verhoeven, 2012). In total, 27 qualitative interviews took place: two experience panels of five and six participants respectively, eight ZMET interviews and eight experience interviews. This resulted in 34 hours of interview material.

The findings of the ZMET research were subsequently tested and enriched with the aid of an online Research Community. A research community is a carefully screened group of people who together with researchers and all possible stakeholders interact with one another via an online platform (Insites Consulting, 2013). During an intensive five-week period, 65 customers (lust and must passengers) took part in this 'insightment community', which began with an ethnographic track in which customers observe their own journey by means of photos and quotes. On the basis of both these observations and those from the ZMET method, participants were empowered to dig deeper and arrive at insights together in a community discussion. The community yielded more than 3,600 posts

in the shape of diaries, photos and quotes of customers. Such extra information literally brings the Customer Journey to life. The combination of these two methods (ZMET and Community) gave us as complete a picture as possible of our customers' emotional experience of their journey.

In this study we distinguished between lust and must passengers: two groups each with their own state of mind. This means it is quite feasible that they experience the service provision differently. Lust passengers are customers with a social or recreational motive, usually travelling 1-3 days a month (or less) by train and often travelling at the weekend or in off-peak hours during the week. Must passengers are customers who commute to school or work. They travel almost daily (on weekdays) during peak hours.

4. Results

The results of the study are shown in seven emotional customer needs and in an emotional curve of train travel for must and lust passengers.

4.1. Seven emotional customer needs

Below are our customers' major experience-related themes. These help us to understand and explain how customers perceive our provision of service, what their needs are and why some aspects give rise to either negative or positive emotions.

- I enjoy my train journey more if I have the feeling I am in control. Customers who travel by train literally relinquish control and are dependent on a railway company for (punctually) delivering them to their destination. This is why they have a considerable need for (some sense of) control. Not having that feeling makes customers feel restless and unpleasant, preventing them from enjoying the train journey. (A sense of) control can be facilitated by sufficient information and a clear structure. A railway company must facilitate customers as much as possible during the preparation of the journey and approach them pro-actively when changes occur during the journey.
- At the station I want to feel welcome and at home. When arriving at the station, customers wish to feel welcome and valued. A station must invite the passenger, as it were, to travel by train. Customers only feel at home at a station when it is safe and pleasant. This is largely dependent on the station environment and its amenities. Lust customers set greater store by entertainment at the station, whereas must customers are more inclined to see the station as a point of arrival and departure.
- I only enjoy my journey when the environment is clean and comfortable. The train and the station are the railway company's calling card. For customers hygiene and a clean station and train are prerequisites. A filthy train (e.g. garbage close to one's seat) is an eyesore and detracts from the experience of the journey. A train should be clean and tidy. A clean and comfortable travel environment gives a passenger a sense of confidence and luxury/self-indulgence. Only then can one really enjoy the trip.
- The conductor is the NS ambassador. Staff on the train and at the station are the face (image) of a railway company. Customers see them as hosts and hostesses and their presence gives passengers confidence and projects a sense of calm and involvement. As ambassadors these NS employees are per definition the right people to put their customers centre-stage, to welcome them and make them feel valued. For the customer the staff really makes a difference, and their visibility and customer focus is crucial.
- I enjoy seeing improvements to the amenities and service at the station and on the train. Customers do not solely assess their travelling by train on the journey itself but also on secondary issues. That is to say it is not just the comfort during the journey but also the surrounding processes, products and services that must be of a certain level if one is to have a positive image of a railway company. The station is more than just a departure or arrival location for passengers, particularly for lust passengers, who embrace a pleasing array of shops and catering.
- When I am on the train I want to enjoy myself and relax. A pleasant train journey is a relaxed one. Sitting on the train is currently customers' (only) peak moment during their entire train journey. This is the moment when travel time is personal time and customers are truly able to 'do their own thing' (reading, working, sleeping,

looking out of the window) and can prolong their working or personal time. This is the greatest added value of travelling by train, which is why it is so important that NS can guarantee this experience. If this is impeded by a passenger not being able to find a seat or any other disturbance, it will have a negative impact on the entire experience.

- I forget NS as soon as I get off the train even though my journey is not yet over. Once off the train, the customer leaves the station and thus also NS. The customer’s journey, however, is not over until he/she has reached a final destination. Customers do not experience NS’s role as one that is door-to-door but door-to-destination (station). They often find subsequent services fall short of the train. The journey and thus also the experience with NS is only truly positively assessed when we also facilitate customers by informing, guiding and helping them during the last step of their journey from station to final destination.

4.2. The emotional curve

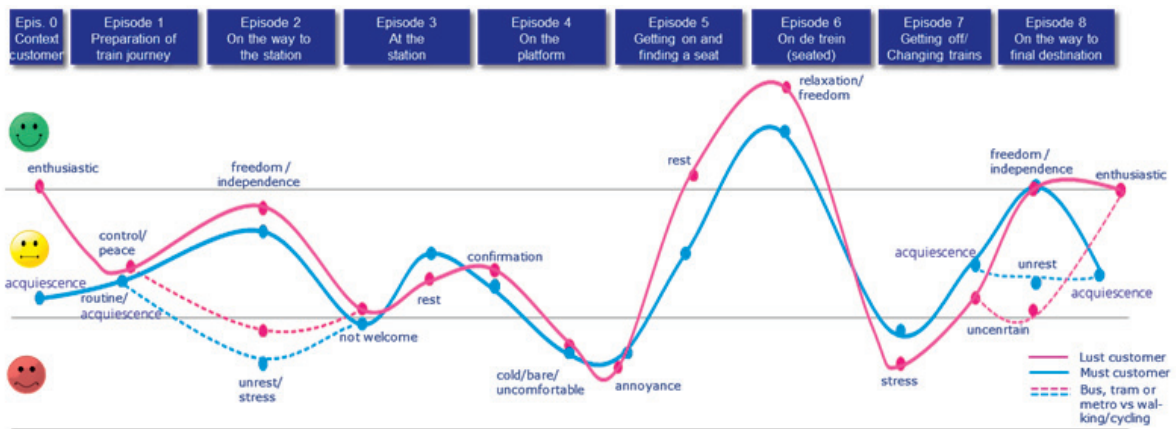


Fig. 4. The emotional curve of train travel.

Although the emotional curves of lust and must passengers are apparently in sync, there are still a number of major differences. The lust passenger starts his/her trip quite positively (with enthusiasm) and looks forward to the journey, whereas the must passenger is much more neutral. For him/her this journey is a routine component of a working day. As we can speak of coping behavior here, the curve of the must passenger is in its entirety more shallow. This passenger knows what to expect and will react less emotionally to certain (unknown) situations.

The type of transport to and from the station strongly influences the experience. The customer who arrives at the station on foot or by bicycle will be more relaxed than the customer arriving by bus, tram or metro. Walking or cycling affords a greater sense of freedom and control than taking the bus.

When arriving at the station, customers wish to feel welcome and valued. At this point customers do not feel welcome. The operational processes on site (station environment and its amenities) insufficiently appeal to customers’ desire to feel valued and with his/her best intentions at heart.

The emotional curve shows only one peak: sitting on the train. Having a seat or not is essential here for the experiential value – only then can one relax and experience the value of the train (travel time is personal time). How strongly this peak is experienced depends on the pleasure-pain gap, because prior to this passengers undergo annoyance/stress when getting on the train with so many other people (Will I find a seat?).

The current end is when one leaves the station for one’s final destination. For customers often a moment of acquiescence. Here a real peak that has some bearing on NS (peak-end rule) is absent. In other words, NS is not expected to rise to the challenge here, but it is an opportunity to give customers a memorable and positive experience.

5. Conclusion

5.1. The four moments when NS can make a difference

On the basis of the emotional curve and the seven emotional needs there are four moments when NS can make a difference in its provision of service to customers:

- During the access transport, when passengers travel to the station by bus, tram or metro. “What’s infuriating is that I have to change a lot and can therefore miss my connection. That’s why I’m stressed and don’t know where I have to go.” Offering customers a great (sense of) control (see customer need 1) during access transport, when they don’t feel in control at all, might result in a more positive experience. One solution might be to offer travel information on connections between bus and train and transfer times.

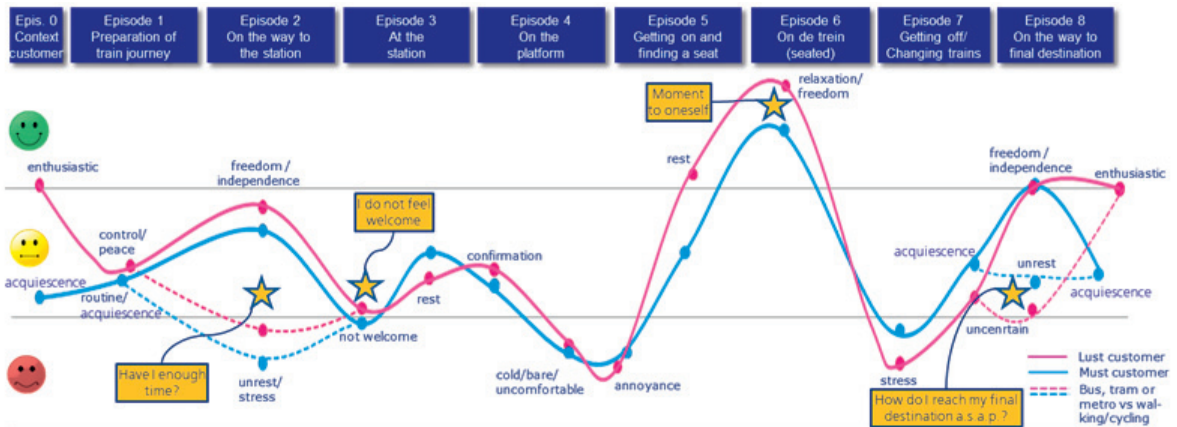


Fig. 5. The Moments of Truth when NS can make a difference.

- When passengers arrive at the station, they do not feel welcome. “What’s irritating is that bicycles are not stored in their proper stand, even indoors. Sometimes, they have been left so unordered that it is really difficult to get past them.” “The steps are (...) an obstacle. I am always happy when I reach the top/bottom without falling or breaking my neck.” Customers wonder if they are indeed the focus of a railway company’s provision of service. Actually addressing this also complies with customer needs 2 and 4 (feeling welcome). This would result in a greater emotional bond between customer and railway company than if this were a purely functional service. Personal attention from employees can play an important role here.

- Maintaining the only peak in the Customer Journey: sitting on the train. Ensuring that passengers have a seat so that the time spent on the train can also be considered valuable time (= personal time). This is essential for the experiential value of our service. Without this moment there is not one peak in the emotional curve! “I always sit in a silence compartment because I relish the peace and quiet there. That’s when I like to read a book.” “For me relaxation is my primary motive for choosing the train as mode of transport. In my opinion, this territory is one USP waiting to be explored by NS.”

- By creating a peak on leaving the station, NS has the opportunity to give (particularly lust) customers a memorable and positive experience. For them, arrival at their destination is an uncertainty: where to now?

5.2. Practical implications

In combination with the peak-end rule, the Customer Journey seems applicable to the railway sector. A thorough analysis of the customer experience during each phase (touchpoint) of the journey, and the importance of that phase

for the customer paves the way to improvement measures and future investments. It is evident that it is more worthwhile (to continue) improving the relevant peaks and not to try and improve all touchpoints. On the basis of evidence-based design, a next step would be to test improvements to any peak in practice. Specifically this means that small-scale pilot projects need to be carried out to demonstrate whether improvements are in line with the theory and which are truly able to increase customer ratings.

The results of this research enable us to view our service provision in a new light, affording us information to address the elements that make customers enthusiastic. In other words it offers NS input to make the right (policy and investment) decisions and to adequately address our processes (doing the right things right).

5.3. Scientific implications

The conducted research is a qualitative one and a logical recommendation would be to quantify the customer journey. On the one hand to determine how strong the emotions are on the Y-axis in the various phases and for different groups of passengers, such as must and lust; on the other hand to determine the importance and experience of the duration of each phase in the chain. Such a quantitative insight will enable a more accurate decision on whether the peaks are too low and to what degree certain peaks are relevant and can be improved.

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