



Back our essential workers: Service with Respect campaign

APPG on Customer Service meeting, 1st October 2020

This meeting was a virtual meeting, held on Zoom

In attendance:

- Chris Evans MP, Chair
- Philip Davies MP, Co-Chair
- Liz Twist MP (Labour) (Blaydon)
- Steven Bonnar MP (SNP) (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill)
- Rachel Hopkins MP (Labour) (Luton South)
- Navendu Mishra MP (Labour) (Stockport)
- Alison Thewliss MP (SNP) (Glasgow Central)
- Roberta Kiro Singh – Research Assistant to Dr Lisa Cameron MP
- Mark Hoskisson – Research Assistant to Mick Whitley MP
- Emma Evans – Research Assistant to Chris Evans MP
- Giles Hawke – Chief Executive, Cosmos Tours
- Kathryn O'Brien – Customer Experience Director, TransPennine Express
- Phil McGilvray – Director of Operations, Cabot Financial
- Paul Moore – Head of Learning and Customer Excellence, LV=
- Joanna Causon – Chief Executive, Institute of Customer Service
- Anne Stoddart – Commercial Director, Institute of Customer Service
- David Dagger - Marketing and Communications Director, Institute of Customer Service
- Gareth Morgan – Director, Cavendish Advocacy
- Chloé Bester – Monitoring Assistant, Cavendish Advocacy

Chris Evans opened the session by thanking all in attendance and explained that the discussion would look at the abuse of frontline customer service professionals brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. He then opened the floor for Giles Hawke, Chief Executive at Cosmos Tours.

Contributions from invited speakers, questions to speakers and discussion

Giles Hawke, Chief Executive at Cosmos Tours

- Explained that travel customers have not only invested their money into their holidays, but also emotionally invested.
- Noted that most people have not been able to take their holidays, which has instigated numerous problems regarding customer refunds.
- Clarified that travel agencies and companies are struggling to issue refunds, considering the money spent by customers has already been pushed further down the supply chain.
- Pointed to the fact that the uncertainty of travel under new Government regulations is creating anxiety amongst customers, consequently spurring on abuse.
- Observed that the staff predominantly being abused tend to be younger, often being untrained on how to cope with abuse.
- Said the pandemic has created tension between travel agency owners and frontline customer service workers, as frontline workers are often not equipped to execute what the owners need to be done.

Joanna Causon, Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service

- Asked what types of abuse were prevalent among customer service workers in the travel industry?

Giles Hawke, Chief Executive at Cosmos Tours

- Noted that customer service workers in travel agencies are most commonly accused of stealing customer's money when refunds are not possible.
- Emphasised that this abuse was widespread, with long term customers equally contributing.



Chris Evans MP

- Asked what effect negative news headlines had on the abuse workers receive, in particular reference to customers being ripped off by travel agencies.

Giles Hawke, Chief Executive at Cosmos Tours

- Emphasised that such negative news stories are representative of a small number of companies not abiding by regulations.
- Stated that a large influence on customer anxiety, and the subsequent abuse, is a lack of consumer-wide understanding of the rules on refunds.
- Noted that customers are projecting their negative experiences from single purchase travel items, such as booking an Airbnb and not getting a refund, onto travel agencies.

Chris Evans MP

- Thanked Giles and welcomed Kathryn O'Brien.

Kathryn O'Brien, Customer Experience Director at TransPennine Express

- Explained that she worked with various departments in TransPennine Express, including customer experience and public relations.
- Mentioned TransPennine Express' multi-million pound investment into its railways to improve their services.
- Observed that before the Covid-19 pandemic, the company's two most crippling problems were chronic over-crowding and train service performance, both of which are less relevant considering decreased customer levels.
- Argued that the onset of the pandemic saw frontline rail workers become key workers.
- Noted that the company's two biggest problems are now encouraging customers to wear face masks and ticketing issues.
- Explained that TransPennine Express as a company decided not to ask frontline workers to enforce the wearing of face masks to avoid confrontation between staff and customers, instead offering face masks at stations and onboard.
- Commented that most confrontations are between customers, who attempt to enforce the government regulations themselves.
- Elaborated that the company had to suspend ticket checks in order to comply with government regulations, and with the reintroduction of ticketing customers have become verbally abusive.
- Mentioned isolated incidents of verbal abuse, spitting and coughing.

Chris Evans MP

- Asked how staff are dealing with customers not wearing face masks.

Kathryn O'Brien, Customer Experience Director at TransPennine Express

- Explained that the company had adopted the police force's Covid-19 guidance which centred around educating people, encouraging adherence to Covid-19 secure guidelines and only enforcing penalties as a last resort.
- Clarified that the task of enforcing face masks is allocated to police, rather than staff.
- Mentioned that the conflict instigated by not wearing a face mask is often between customers later at night and alcohol fuelled.

Joanna Causon, Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service

- Asked whether TransPennine Express has seen a rise in sickness amongst their employees.

Kathryn O'Brien, Customer Experience Director at TransPennine Express

- Acknowledged that TransPennine Express has seen a spike in sickness.

Joanna Causon, Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service

- Referenced a previous conversation with Kathryn, in which it was mentioned that the company was also facing problems with seat markings.
- Emphasised that the Institute of Customer Service is keen to highlight that customer service abuse is not isolated to one sector.



Kathryn O'Brien, Customer Experience Director at TransPennine Express

- Explained that TransPennine Express suspended seat reservation services at the start of the pandemic, instead introducing seat markings.
- Admitted that the company has since decided to remove seat markings, in an attempt to make travel more comfortable for customers, but with a cleaning campaign in place.
- Explained that services were currently being used at 30% of previous levels, which is not sustainable for the company, thus they have decided to make travel more accommodating.
- Noted that the company intend to reintroduce seat reservations in their December timetable.

Philip Davies MP

- Asked what involvement the British Transport Police have had in incidences of abuse.

Kathryn O'Brien, Customer Experience Director at TransPennine Express

- Highlighted that the police are a finite resource, therefore this resource is targeted in the most needed areas, which currently are the lockdowns in the North of England.
- Stated that the police's approach has been rather "soft", with only 81 people having been fined across the UK rail system since 23 March 2020.
- Announced that TransPennine Express are trialling a safer travel pledge.

Chris Evans MP

- Thanked Kathryn and welcomed Phil McGilvray.

Phil McGilvray, Director of Operations at Cabot Financial

- Explained that his company works with customers in their financial difficulty.
- Argued that staff have also been impacted by working from home.
- Outlined that Cabot Financial does not have the same physical challenges as other customer service industries, as the service is offered through phones and digital services.
- Stated that Cabot Financial have trained their staff to understand what the line of abuse is and how to cope with it.
- Admitted that Cabot Financial previously did not have a measurement of hostility to measure the "line of abuse" against.
- Said Cabot Financial implemented a programme that registers hostility in terms of specific phrases, which triggers an alert to both the agent and the team leader, showing the agent that they are not alone.
- Noted that there have been relatively few cases, with about 1 in 1,000 calls being deemed hostile.
- Encouraged other companies to implement similar systems.

Chris Evans MP

- Noted that before the pandemic, abuse against customer service agents was often instigated by a frustration with telephony.

Phil McGilvray, Director of Operations at Cabot Financial

- Argued that the worst of the abuse against customer service workers is yet to come, with the termination of the furlough scheme and the possibility of a new lockdown.
- Mentioned that Cabot Financial shut down all their outbound services, with customers now having to get in touch with agents rather than vice versa.

Joanna Causon, Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service

- Clarified that there is a distinction between poor customer service and customers abusing workers, with the 'Service with Respect' campaign focusing on hostility and abuse.
- Pointed to a general concern about employees potentially feeling isolated by a lack of a support system whilst working from home.
- Referenced the institute's latest research, which asked 1,000 employees how they were experiencing customer service. 51% of employees said they increasingly experienced hostility, with 20% expecting it to get worse.
- Agreed that front-facing employees are often inexperienced and this doesn't help them to cope with continuous levels of hostility or abuse.



- Stated that the institute's research concluded that 20% of customers admit they have seen instances of hostility, and an additional 35% admit they have stepped in to defend a frontline worker.
- Said nearly half of customers believe companies and the Government are not doing enough to protect customer service workers.
- Outlined the Institute's campaign, dividing it into three parts. Firstly, the Institute wish to call upon the Government to change legislation. Secondly, the Institute want organisations to train and develop their employees. Finally, the Institute want to stimulate consumer awareness.
- Clarified that the Institute is in communications with BRC and USDAW.

Anne Stoddart, Commercial Director at the Institute of Customer Service

- Asked the speakers if social media throughout the pandemic had been a blessing or a curse.

Kathryn O'Brien, Customer Experience Director at TransPennine Express

- Noted that TransPennine Express did not have to deal so much with mobile footage as with enquiries.
- Stated that it is important to equip employees to adequately respond to such enquiries.
- Said such enquiries to a certain extent are welcome, as they offer intelligence into where policing should be targeted.

Chris Evans MP, Co-Chair of the APPG, made a final request for MPs to apply for a Westminster debate on the topic of customer service abuse. He then brought the meeting to a close and thanked speakers and guests.

Ends at 10:20am