Right on time

How SMS helped Virgin Trains be there for their customers
The rush of the wildebeest

Huddled on the banks of the Mara River, Africa’s wildebeest are waiting.

Suddenly, all at once, the whole herd is in motion. Ten thousand bodies swarm in an awesome surge of dust, hooves and horns. The beasts scramble and jostle and stumble and barge, hurling themselves forwards, churning the water into a white spray, each desperate to make it to safety and the opposite bank.

It’s one of the most awesome sights in the natural world.

If you want to see people behaving like wildebeests, head to London’s Euston Station on a Friday evening between 5pm and 7pm.

You won’t see much wildlife, but the herds of commuters are wild enough. On the huge concourse, you’ll see thousands of them waiting, necks craned, furiously scanning the departure board. Each time a platform is announced, another group surges forward in a flurry of handbags, briefcases, umbrellas, pushchairs and weekend bags.

But beyond this busy scene, the really eagle-eyed station watcher will see a different story. Not everyone is staring at the departure screens. Not everyone is caught up in the rush and panic. A few select passengers look calm and collected. They’ve just come out of a nearby restaurant where they’ve been having a pre-journey drink or a relaxed meal before traveling. One brief glance at their phone, then they’re strolling to their train’s platform ahead of the crowds – and with just a hint of swagger in their step.

These are Virgin Trains customers. And they’ve just received a text message telling them their platform number before everyone else finds out.

At OpenMarket we call this an Empathetic Interaction.
The Empathetic Interaction explained

The Empathetic Interaction is all about seizing the countless invisible opportunities to surprise and delight your customers by giving them information, engagements, experiences and alerts that they will value at precise moments in exact places.

It’s about using what you know about the individual and the situation they’re in – then anticipating what might make them happy. When their needs and yours can be met in a single moment, Empathetic Interactions become truly valuable.

All you need is an intelligent mobile messaging system linked to your customer ops tech stack. A good imagination comes in pretty handy too.
Crowds, noise and busyness

Euston is one of the UK’s busiest rail stations. It’s got a yearly footfall comparable to Heathrow (about 72 million) and the number of trains arriving there increases every year.

For the individual passenger, it can be a difficult experience. The size of the crowds can make people tense. The risk of bumping into passengers traveling on alternate trajectories is high. And the lines at busy ticket barriers and the fact that the furthest carriages are about 1/3 mile from the concourse can make people worry they’ll miss their train.

The key busy point is on the vast main concourse. The sheer volume of trains and passengers mean it’s extremely busy, and the passenger surges when platform numbers are displayed on departure boards make traveling awkward and uncomfortable.
Project Surge

For Virgin Trains, this experience wasn’t good enough. The company has nearly 36m passengers a year across their services – and the conditions were causing frustrations for each and every one of them.

That’s why they started Project Surge, to provide a simple and effective text to ease passenger flows at Euston.

It means they can send the train platform and seat number to each passenger who’s booked online – a full 75 seconds before it comes up on the big departure boards. The online bookers get a stress-free head start – and the rest of the passengers benefit from there being fewer people too.

20 minutes before departure the passenger gets a text message to reassure them they haven’t been forgotten.

75 seconds before it’s announced to everyone else, the passenger gets an Early Bird Message, letting them know their platform number and reminding them where they’re sitting.

Based on need and status, these staggered notifications are sent to people with special needs, elderly travelers, people traveling with children and loyalty members. This splits one big crowd surge into smaller groups, taking the pressure off the ticket control process and improving the customer experience all round.

alison m
@aj1_uk

First on the @virgintrains and I didn’t even do the famous Euston dash. Gotta love text alerts!

20/08/2016, 16:12
‘Well that’s clever!’

The best innovations are the ones that make you slap your forehead and say, ‘Why didn’t we think of that?’ And the most innovative companies are the ones setting the benchmark for customer experience.

Very few people consciously think, ‘Wow! I can use my phone as a ticket to check-in for my flight!’ It’s just become standard. It’s when an airline doesn’t offer smartphone ticketing and you’re fumbling around in your bag looking for printed tickets that you really notice.

So it is with Virgin Trains Early Bird Message system. Customers love it. 25% of passengers buy train tickets direct from Virgin and improving their experience has paid dividend: digital ticket sales have increased and Virgin Trains had a 28% Net Promoter Score increase six months after the program started.

It’s a huge customer experience improvement – which only timely SMS messages could deliver. There’s no other channel that could be there in that exact moment.

Virgin is leading the industry. And in an age where customer experience is rapidly becoming the biggest differentiator, leading the industry is the only place to be.

When you can do that with something as simple as a text message – personal and powerful to the customer, automated and massively scalable to you… well, that’s even better.
We’re OpenMarket

We help the biggest brands in the world use mobile messaging to connect with their customers in the moments when it counts. When they need to be there and be responsive in real-time. When customer experience isn’t just a buzzword: it’s an obsession.

We’d love to do the same for you.

For more stories where SMS made the difference, check out the rest of our Empathetic Interaction series.