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The crumbling edge of quality... ...or "Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'be"

Robert Amstutz

Photo: Annika Amstutz

The late Sir Peter Parker, when Chairman of the British Railways Board, commented in the late 1970s that he was doing his best to shore up the 'crumbling edge of quality' in the British railway industry, against the failure of successive governments to adequately fund the industry. I recognise that we cannot compare today's Swiss railways with the BRB of that time. Nevertheless, particularly in the last 12 months, passengers are becoming aware of increasing quality issues particularly within SBB services. Perhaps the title of Lionel Bart's 1960 hit musical sums it up, albeit in 'Cockney' rather than Schweizerdeutsch!

The most obvious of the many failing quality issues are the stickers to be found on many carriage doors indicating that the door is unserviceable. I recently observed a regional train with all four doors of one carriage blocked, therefore rendering the carriage out of service. Often the sensor on an internal connecting door to the next carriage is defective and the door is locked-back in the open position, subjecting passengers to increased noise and reduced comfort levels. Also in this recent exceptionally hot weather carriages in both IC and IR trains have been observed carrying "Air conditioning out of service" stickers, and the defective carriage is again rendered almost unusable due to fixed windows.

Toilets are another issue, especially as facilities with a contained effluent system appear prone to developing faults, with the result that services regularly operate with one or more toilets out of service. No problem if you are on an IC or IR train as each carriage has a toilet. Recently however I travelled on a, luckily lightly loaded, IR between Brugg and Basel that had six of its seven toilets out of service. The issue of defective toilets is becoming so bad that drivers are starting to refuse to take out some regional trains if no, or insufficient, toilets are functioning.

Overcrowding at stations is now becoming a problem with potential safety issues. In the north of Switzerland Brugg, Baden, Lenzburg, to name just three stations that I use on a regular basis, are totally overcrowded at peak times. It can be difficult to get on or off the platform with passengers regularly reporting that they have missed 'advertised' connections. Even

Visp in the Valais suffers overcrowding at peak times in the winter ski season and has difficulty coping with the volumes of passengers since it became a busy interchange following the opening of the Lötschberg Base Tunnel. An example of the Law of Unintended Consequences?

Late running, along with cancellations to ensure timetable stability, seems prevalent. Fine if you have a train 30 minutes or even 1 hour later, but not fine if you miss your last connecting bus to your village and there is no helpful SBB customer service person on a closed station to help. Not all passengers are as familiar with train travel as some of us are.

Graffiti and vandalism. It is not uncommon to see trains with both carriages and wagons heavily covered in graffiti. One such vehicle was recently seen completely covered. SBB tries to take such rolling stock out of service within 24 hours but this is often not practical. While it is not a safety issue, it is an image issue and a cost factor. Last year graffiti removal alone cost SBB CHF5.6m of ticket revenue. It is not helped by the common misconception in Europe that vandals with spray cans are allowed to inflict this form of criminal damage on Swiss rolling stock - and call it 'Art'!

Unfortunately accidents do happen, and during early summer 2018 there have been numerous ones causing delays. Many of these incidents are not the fault of the SBB, but, however they occur, the need for reliable passenger information becomes important, but often it is sadly lacking.

Why are we experiencing all this? My friends at SBB (Passenger, Cargo and Traffic Control) all believe that financially driven cut-backs in the maintenance of passenger and cargo rolling stock plays a roll. However at the end of the day Swiss railways are, to a certain extent, a victim of their own success. Since the introduction of the Taktfahrplan timetable in 1982 more and more trains are competing for space on an overcrowded rail network. SBB is aware of this and in the 2018/2019-timetable will on some routes break the timetable and reduce stops at stations in an attempt to achieve timetable stability. Needless to say, this news has not gone down well with many passengers whose commute will become longer and may involve more changes. 