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Chris Bowditch

An analysis of Trainline's digital communications strategies and their impact on creating trustworthiness and trust amongst consumers

Trainline is a global e-commerce platform, which offers over 125,000 rail travel possibilities across 24 countries (Trainline 2017a). The brand promises to save its customers "time, hassle and money", a commitment which is visibly reflected in its marketing strategy (Trainline 2017a). Trainline utilises digital communication strategies to deliver to a first class relationship marketing experience to its customers. As a result of multiple external influences, it is vital for the brand to construct a trustworthy reputation, overcome uncertainty and develop trust from its customers, an angle that has received less attention from academics (Sekhon et al. 2014). This paper explores existing research into trustworthiness and trust presents an adapted framework, which proposes that a practical, emotional and personalised dialogue with consumers is the best method to build trust in the rail industry.

Keywords: Trustworthiness, Trust, Communication, Rail Industry, Relationship Marketing, Uncertainty

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Trainline

Recently emerging as a key player in the rail industry, Trainline's website and mobile application attract over 45 million unique users each month (Trainline 2017a). This

demonstrates the strength of Trainline's relationship marketing communications despite facing a number of adversities. The privatised train industry is frequently bombarded with negative media coverage and word-of-mouth communication which negatively shapes less-informed consumers' perceptions of Trainline (Tims et al. 1989; Mintel 2014). The media onslaught is one of many existing threats to the brand which may negatively impact consumer perceptions of the organisation. Trainline's impactful communications position the brand as trustworthy and therefore absorbing customer uncertainties.

The Role of Trust in Relationship Marketing

The emergence of relationship marketing literature ushered change in marketing academia (Cowles 1997). Trust was frequently highlighted as an important construct within the discipline during the early academic developments (Gronroos 1996; Cowles 1997; Michell et al. 1998; Selnes 1998). The Commitment-Trust theory accentuated the importance of creating trust, recognising trust as a trigger of commitment and as a necessity to sustain long-term business relationships (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Later research into the Commitment-Trust theory validated this perspective in a business-to-consumer environment, arguing that trust generates customer loyalty (Ndubisi 2007; Prasad and Aryasri 2008).

Further research from Wang et al. (2016) emphasised the importance of trust as an influencer of consumer behavior in an e-commerce context. Mukherjee and Nath (2007) hypothesised that online trust differed to offline trust due to the absences of interpersonal contact, human attributes and both spatial and time proximity. In addition, consumer concerns about data privacy, security and business motives are considered factors that may influence disposition to trust (McKnight and Chervany 2001; Mukherjee and Nath 2007). These factors create a clear obstacle of uncertainty for Trainline, which the brand must overcome through their marketing communications to develop a relationship with its customers (Schurr and Ozanne 1985).

Trustworthiness and trust are two separate constructs within relationship marketing with an important distinction (Hardin 2002). Trustworthiness is cited as a vital characteristic that a trustor must see within a trustee in order to allow trusting behaviours (McKnight and Chervany 2001; Hardin 2002). Sekhon et al. (2014) conceptualise trustworthiness as an influencer of trust and consequently Trainline must appear trustworthy to consumers to earn trust and brand loyalty (Morgan and Hunt 1994). While these perspectives were developed to understand creating trust in comparison to generating commitment, it is now clear that the antecedents of trustworthiness require further exploration (Khaurof et al. 2014; Sekhon et al. 2014). Khaurof et al. (2014) signify that trustworthiness should be considered an essential strategic goal in relationship marketing practice and identified that research exploration was needed into circumstance that may mitigate the translation of trustworthiness.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed conceptual framework has taken influence from the Trustworthiness and Trust model proposed by Sekhon et al. (2014, p.411) which identified expertise,

competence and concern as antecedents of trustworthiness, cognitive trust and affective trust. The adapted framework applies these ideas to the context of the rail industry (Sekhon et al. 2014, p.411) and specifically Trainline. Sekhon et al. (2014, p.411) underline the threat of uncertainty to relationship marketing practice, therefore the proposed model will place emphasis on how Trainline overcomes uncertainty in order to build trust. These developments could have rich managerial implications for other high-involvement service industries where consumers face uncertainty. The framework argues that organisation ability and benevolence are drivers of trustworthiness and organisation resiliency drives uncertainty absorption (Figure 1). In turn these are antecedents of cognitive and affective trust (Johnson and Grayson 2005).

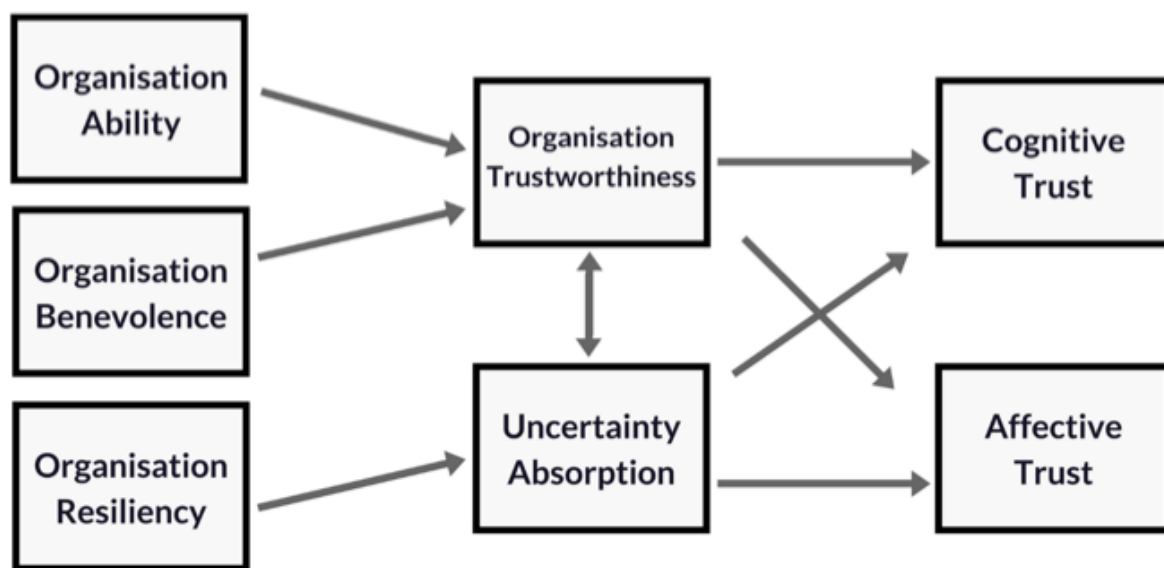


Figure 1. Conceptual Trustworthiness and Uncertainty Absorption Model (Adapted from Sekhon et al. 2014, p.411).

Organisation Ability

Organisation ability refers to the customer's presupposition of competent performance from a relational partner and plays a vital role in positioning a brand as trustworthy (Mayer et al. 1995; Sekhon et al. 2014). Mayer et al. (1995) labelled organisation competence as the most significant influencer of ability, this was validated by Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) who argued that this operational competence was communicated through the visible behaviours of front-line employees. Nonetheless Beldad et al. (2011) found that competence was still the most significant influencer of competence in a digital relationship context. Therefore to generate trustworthiness it is paramount that Trainline must convincingly communicate that its organisational competence, consistency and expertise can deliver their service promises to its customers (Colquitt et al. 2007).

Organisational competence is the ability to do something successfully or efficiently. New users of the Trainline application will be greeted with an informative welcome screen (Figure 2; Trainline 2017b). Trainline is reacting to consumer demands by offering the

ability to book last-minute mobile tickets or to add extra-service benefits (Trainline 2017b). These introductory tactics are immediately presenting Trainline as competent by emphasizing its fixation with providing service excellence (Michell et al. 1998; Caldwell and Clapham 2003).

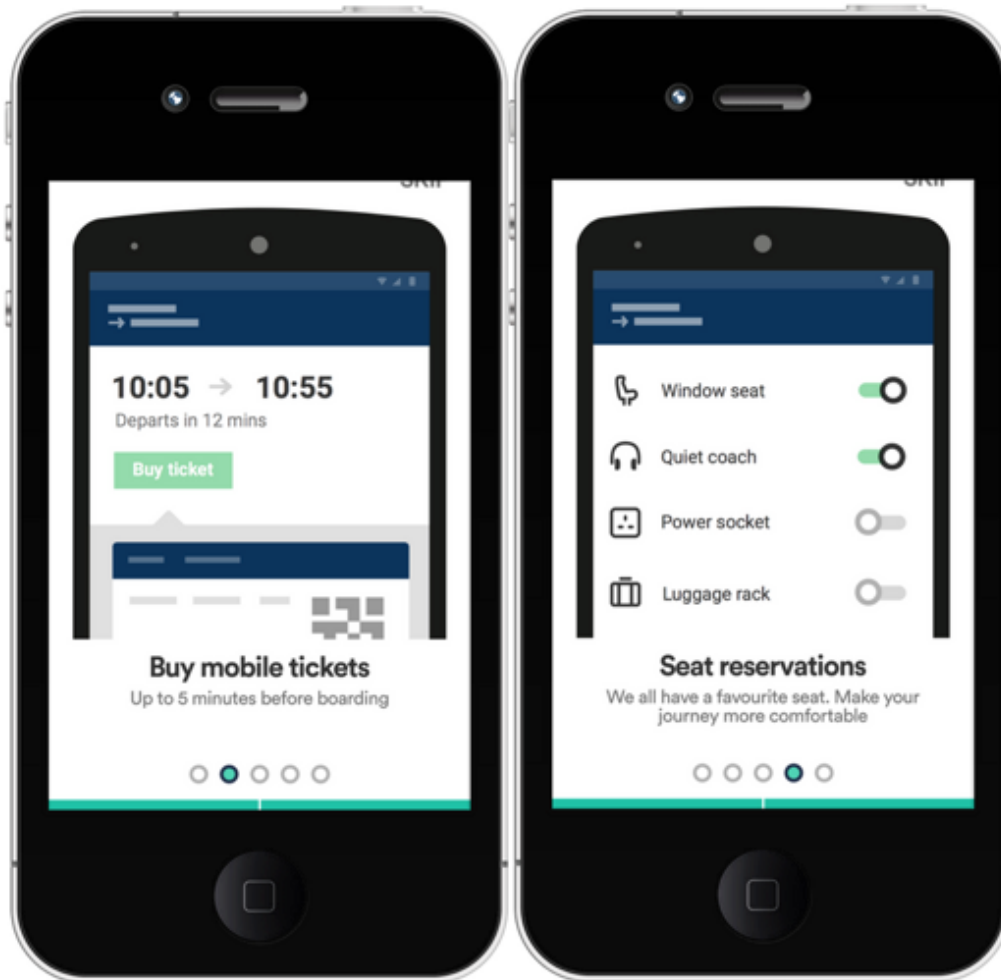


Figure 2. Trainline App Loading Screen (Trainline 2017).

Organisation Benevolence

Organisation benevolence can be identified as visible behaviours that portray the customer’s interests as a priority, especially over their own business goals (Fang et al. 2008; Sekhon et al. 2014). Trainline’s lateral industry partners have gained a reputation as opportunistic due to the steep rise in the price of rail travel with no major improvements to the actual journey or customer service, to avoid this reflecting on the brand Trainline must appear benevolent to customers (Doney and Cannon 1997; Donaldson and O’Toole 2007; Mintel 2014). In practice to achieve this Trainline must exaggerate their customer concern, consideration and sensitivity in addition to demonstrating a propensity to avoid exploiting the trustor’s vulnerability (Sekhon et al. 2014). This is evident in the company mission statement which implies that saving customers’ “time, hassle and money” as a business priority (Trainline 2017a).

Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) argued that benevolent actions should be seen as an extra-service taken on by front-line employees. Figure 3 shows a notable example of Trainline's benevolence in their journey reminder communications (Penrose 2015). Trainline combine a personalised tactic with a caring touch, reminding the customer to pack a weather-appropriate item (Penrose 2015). Rather than just showing concern for the customer's time with their service, this direct email campaign amplifies Trainline's consideration for the customer's entire day. This could also be considered as benevolent as Trainline could utilise this space for upselling but instead focus on enriching the customer's experience (Sekhon et al. 2014). Smith and Barclay (1997) argue that utilizing benevolent marketing tactics can increase trust amongst consumers.

Figure 3 depicts word-of-mouth in the form of a social media recommendation which has been influenced by Trainline's benevolent digital communication strategy (de Matos and Rossi 2008; Penrose 2015). Word-of-mouth is considered in relationship marketing scholarship as a trusting behavior, which in this case has been created as a consequence of the trustor feeling an emotional connection to the trustee (Morgan and Hunt 1994; de Matos and Rossi 2008; O'Cass and Carlson 2011).



Figure 3. Social Media Recommendation (Penrose 2015).

Organisation Resiliency

Organisation resiliency concerns the trustee's propensity to predict and act upon potential uncertainties which might impact the service exchange (Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002). Academic perspectives have previously presented an organisation's ability to solve problems as an individual antecedent of trust (Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002; Palmatier et al. 2006). However, in this context organisation resiliency should not be defined by problem-solving capabilities. As a booking service rather than a rail travel operator, Trainline have limited control over rail disruptions (Transport Focus 2017). For that reason, Trainline must communicate its organisation resiliency by offering solutions to a service disruption before the customer realises that a disruption may exist (Transport Focus 2017). Fang et al. (2008) suggested that delayed responses to external threats could harm the development of trust in interorganisational relations, the proposed framework predicates that correlates within Trainline's business-to-consumer environment.

Figure 4 shows an email campaign sent to Trainline customers who frequently utilise a service that was likely to be disrupted. Trainline's foresight is key to the success of this message, the brand has predicted consumer concerns and have offered a dedicated webpage and plugged the resilient competencies of the Trainline app (Trainline 2017d). These competencies include up-to-date train times and a journey tracker which can help to reduce consumer uncertainty. Trainline are also able to absorb consumer uncertainty by openly sharing methods to gain refunds following service disruptions (Trainline 2017d).

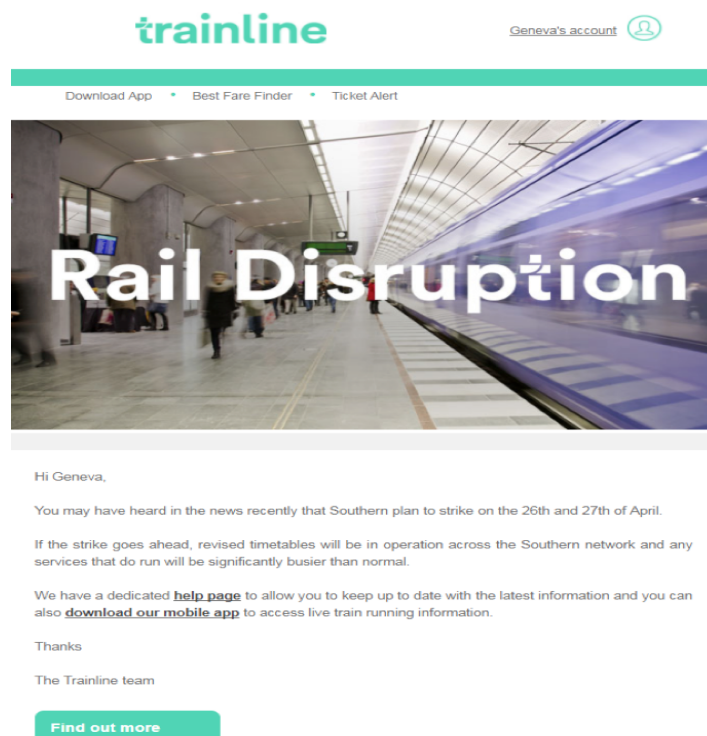


Figure 4. Service Disruption Email (Trainline, 2017c).

Trustworthiness

Amplifying its ability and motives can assist Trainline in appearing trustworthy to customers (Andaleeb 1992; Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002). Caldwell and Clapham (2003) introduce a theory of trustworthiness working as a mediating lens. The framework necessitates that in order to develop a perception of trustworthiness about Trainline, a trustee's decision must pass through a trustworthiness filter (Kharouf et al. 2014). Thus, if a trustor sees less competence in an organisation this will negatively impact their propensity to engage in trusting behaviours (Caldwell and Clapham 2003). Kharouf et al. (2014) criticised the framework suggesting that determinants of trustworthiness needed to be defined. Figure 1 argues that organisation ability and benevolence are determinants of trustworthiness and therefore pivotal to Trainline's relationship marketing success (Andaleeb 1992; Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002).

Uncertainty Absorption

This paper considers the consumer uncertainty that Trainline faces and its impact on buyer partnerships (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Ashill and Jobber 2014). Sekhon et al. (2014) argue that uncertainty must be accepted by consumers in order to perceive an organisation as trustworthy. Figure 1 disagrees by placing equal emphasis on both organisation trustworthiness and uncertainty absorption as constructs which can precede trusting behaviours. Uncertainty absorption can be defined as the state of feeling increased acceptance of the unknown and potential consequent vulnerabilities (Sekhon et al. 2014). In this context uncertainty absorption is equally as important to relationship marketing success as trustworthiness.

Uncertainty absorption and trustworthiness are two constructs that complement one another but can exist as their own separate entities. Trustworthiness is constructed through positive consumer perceptions while uncertainty absorption negates potential risks (Andaleeb 1992; Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002). Both constructs are central to Trainline's creation of trust, uncertainty absorption also takes on the role of a mediating lens (Caldwell and Clapham 2003; Kharouf et al. 2014) as illustrated in Figure 1 which shows Trainline's response to service disruptions across the train network.

Trust

Generating consumer trust should be visualised as a strategic goal for Trainline which acts as a gateway to developing a committed, loyal, long-term business-to-consumer relationship and therefore presenting relational opportunities (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Kharouf et al. 2014). Figure 1 borrows from Sekhon et al. (2014) and divides trust into two concepts: cognitive and affective.

Cognitive trust is rooted in knowledge and reliability and can be built with the accumulation of knowledge about the relational partner's competence, consistency and resilience (Michell et al. 1998; Johnson and Grayson 2005). Cognitive trust is a driver of effective sales and repeat business (Johnson and Grayson 2005). Meanwhile affective trust highlights the importance of showing concern about the trustor and therefore Trainline should continue to place emphasis on its benevolence to generate affective

trust (Webber 2008; Sekhon et al. 2014). Figure 3 is a clear example of how Trainline's benevolent actions have crafted organisation trustworthiness, affective trust and positive trusting behaviours (Penrose 2015). While cognitive trust can deliver financial and relational benefits, earning affective trust can help Trainline gain an emotional connection with its customers and develop further success in its relationship marketing efforts (Cyr et al. 2009; Sekhon et al. 2014).

DISCUSSION

The power of influencing factors in relational strategies and outcomes has been widely discussed in relationship marketing literature (Palmatier et al. 2006). This framework considers the negative influence of uncertainty facing modern organisations. Trainline is a useful example as its relational efforts must overcome uncertainty to generate trust from consumers (Wang et al. 2006; Mintel 2014). The managerial implications following this research are rich. Transport Focus (2015, p.21) found that a practical, emotional and personalised dialogue with consumers is the best method to build trust in the rail industry, validating the proposed framework.

Direct mail should still be considered an effective tactic for relationship marketers, offsetting arguments that its impact is declining in value (Huang 2015). Figure 3 confirms that Trainline's benevolent and personalised direct email campaigns can be translated into trust amongst consumers (Doney and Cannon 1997). Trainline should continue to highlight their customer-focussed ability, motives and resiliency using these tactics and thus sustain their strong connection with their customers (Etter 2005). The importance of communications may increase as Trainline would have to manage customer expectations to sustain this brand equity (Etter 2005; Nicolae et al. 2013).

Two major areas of further research should be approached following this paper. Firstly, the proposed model should be tested using a range of brands with consideration that these brands will face different levels of uncertainty in comparison to Trainline. This can verify the importance of uncertainty absorption as a construct within relationship marketing academia and practice. Finally, exploration into Trainline or a similar brand's strategy for creating commitment or loyalty following uncertainty absorption should be undertaken. The implications could present another adaptation to the Trustworthiness and Trust model (Sekhon et al. 2014).

The significance of the proposed framework is clear from previous literature and scholarly research. Although there is clearly room for further research, the adapted framework can be valuable to exhibit how practical, emotional and personalised dialogue with consumers is the best method to build trust in the rail industry.

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