

Using communications to change the narrative around rail

PROMOTING GOOD PRACTICE IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH RAIL | DEVELOPED BY



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Those involved in the research felt there was a need to change the general perception about rail from negative to something a lot more positive. Participants said there needs to be a shift in awareness of the role that rail plays in people's everyday lives, and the way it adds value to society.

The ways in which rail engages communities and delivers social value is an opportunity to turn the narrative around, shouting about the industry's successes and the real-life differences it makes.

Desired and suggested elements of best practice included:

Strategic communications:

Prioritise people and communities

- Shift focus from technical and commercial language to everyday relevance.
- Emphasise how rail serves ordinary people and integrates into daily life.

Promote social value

- Use communications to highlight rail's social, economic and environmental contributions.
- Consider a year-long campaign focused on social value with consistent messaging.

Create a positive narrative

- Move away from negative or reactive messaging.
- Use taglines like *"Rail – we deliver everyday life"* to build resonance and trust.

Community engagement:

Enable genuine dialogue

- Use the community rail movement as a platform for two-way communication.
- Listen actively to local concerns and respond transparently.

Collaborate across the industry

- Treat community engagement as a shared responsibility.
- Promote a unified narrative that reflects shared values and goals.

Use local stories and case studies

- Share real-life examples from stations, community rail, and social value reports.
- Highlight how rail positively impacts individuals and communities.



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Messaging and content:

Drip feed consistent messaging

- Focus on one theme at a time (e.g. social value) and reinforce it regularly.
- Align all communications with broader strategic goals (e.g. DfT/GBR priorities).

Highlight environmental benefits

- Emphasise rail's role in sustainable travel and reducing carbon emissions.

Raise awareness of freight

- Educate the public on freight's role in everyday life (e.g. delivery of goods, construction materials).
- Use relatable examples to make freight more visible and understood.

Measurement and Feedback:

Measure impact beyond numbers

- Combine quantitative data with narrative storytelling to show rail's value.
- Build trust by demonstrating real-world outcomes and improvements.

Actively listen to feedback

- Use surveys and social media to gather insights.
- Tailor services and communications based on community needs.

“Promotion of the social value of rail could help people to understand the industry better. It gets a lot of bad press, so a joint approach to show how it supports communities could help to counter that.”

“When asked about the railways, people will not mention freight, and there is a lack of understanding about what the freight sector delivers.”

“There is a general lack of awareness of the role rail can, and does, play in people's lives.”

“People are too cautious to come out with good news stories due to rail's negative reputation. It would be great to increase trust in the impact it makes.”

“We have had useful conversations with children and families as people don't associate the railway with the 'delivery of everyday life.' Lots needs to be done, but the impact can be enhanced by working collectively.”



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Why is using communications to change the narrative around rail important to the rail industry?

Using communications to shift the narrative around rail strengthens the industry's relationship with the public and demonstrates its wider value. Perceptions are often shaped by negative or reactive messaging, yet rail plays a vital role in everyday life. By prioritising people and communities in communications, the industry can show how rail supports ordinary journeys, connects families, and underpins local economies. This human centred approach makes rail more relatable and builds trust.

A stronger narrative also allows the industry to highlight the significant social, economic and environmental benefits it delivers. Through consistent, prolonged messaging, particularly around themes like social value, rail can better communicate its contribution to sustainability, reduced carbon emissions, and thriving communities. Making freight more visible through relatable examples could also further broaden public understanding of its role in daily life.

Effective communication is equally important for engagement. By listening actively to local concerns, using relationships with community rail and other community groups as a platform for genuine dialogue, and sharing real stories from stations and community projects, the industry can demonstrate transparency and shared values. Combining measurable outcomes with storytelling helps the public see real world improvements. Ultimately, a positive, coherent narrative, such as the collective Railway 200 messaging seen in 2025, strengthens public confidence and reinforces rail's importance to national life.



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Case Study:

Railway 200 – reframing the story of Britain’s railways

In 2025, the **Railway 200** campaign delivered a year-long, nationwide celebration marking 200 years of the modern railway. Its positivity successfully reshaped the national narrative around rail, shifting perceptions from a sector often associated with challenges to one recognised for its heritage, innovation and vital role in Britain’s future.

Railway 200 brought together hundreds of organisations across the rail industry, cultural institutions, education providers and community groups. This unprecedented level of partnership enabled more than 10,000 events and activities to take place across the UK, engaging tens of millions of people. By uniting track and train, heritage and modern operations, the campaign presented a cohesive and optimistic story about rail’s value to society. A key driver of this positive narrative was the campaign’s emphasis on storytelling.

Through national media coverage, broadcast documentaries, public installations and creative initiatives – from commemorative coins to murals – the campaign celebrated rail’s achievements and human stories. This helped foster public pride in a British invention that transformed the world.

The standout initiative, Inspiration, a touring exhibition train created with the National Railway Museum, brought the story directly to communities. By showcasing rail’s past, present and technological future, it engaged over 45,000 visitors – many of them young people – strengthening awareness of career opportunities and positively influencing perceptions of the industry’s relevance.

Railway 200 not only celebrated history, it repositioned rail as a modern, innovative sector with a bright future. Most importantly, it created a lasting legacy of collaboration and public appreciation, helping the UK’s rail industry tell its biggest and most positive story in a generation.

