

## The Little Engine That Couldn't And Wouldn't

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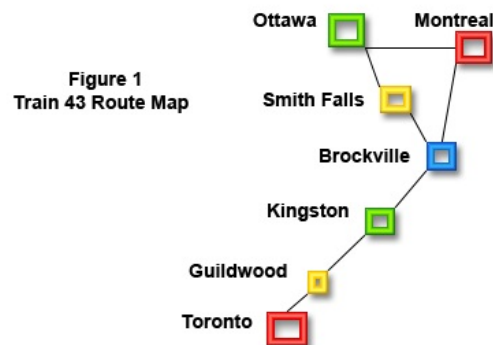
**Headline:** IT WAS A LOT LIKE THE TITANIC  
**Subhead line:** Passengers trapped on 18-hour train journey organize medical care, beg food from crew.

1 It was 9:40 a.m., Thursday, January 8, 1998. Via Rail Train 43 left Ottawa, Ontario, the Nation's  
 2 Capital, on schedule. Destination: Toronto, Ontario, the Provincial Capital. The scheduled arrival  
 3 time for the 446 km trip (about 280 miles) was 1:40 p.m. - an expected journey of 4 hours. The  
 4 route and schedule for Train 43 are presented in Table 1. Figure 1 shows the route map.

Table 1 Train 43 Route and Schedule			
City	Distance (1 km $\approx$ 0.62 miles)		Time
	km	Miles	
Ottawa	0	0	9:40 a.m.
Smith Falls	66	41	10:23 a.m.
Brockville	111	69	10:52 a.m.
Kingston	191	118	11:31 a.m. (Arrival) 11:34 a.m. (Departure)
Guildwood	425	264	1:25 p.m.
Toronto	446	277	1:40 p.m.

5 **Reality:** The trip actually took 18 hours to  
 6 complete! The train arrived in  
 7 Toronto at 3:30 a.m. on Friday,  
 8 January 9. Clearly, it was not a  
 9 Gilligan's Island 3-hour tour! - Or  
 10 was it? So, what happened?

11 Prior to departure, Via Rail was aware of the  
 12 poor winter weather conditions in the area. The  
 13 route followed by the train was in the path of a  
 14 severe winter storm. Prior to departure,



15 however, the crew ensured one passenger that, despite the severe winter ice storm in the area, a storm  
16 that had shut down entire towns in Eastern Ontario, there would be no delays.

17 It was only 40 minutes into the journey when things started to turn for the worse: The train had to  
18 stop because a tree had fallen onto the track. The train had to wait until an emergency crew arrived

19 to remove the tree. This incident occurred repeatedly during the trip. In one case, a farmer with a  
20 chainsaw was able to remove the tree before the emergency crew arrived. En route, the train also  
21 ran into a fallen tree and had to deal with a power line that had fallen upon it. There was growing  
22 concern among the passengers that it would take a long time for help to arrive if the train derailed.

23 I guess the Canadian temperament kept the passengers calm for the first few hours, even if they did  
24 become somewhat fatalistic. However, by 4:00 p.m., the train still had not reached Brockville, a 111  
25 km journey that should only have taken one hour and 12 minutes. But then the train started going  
26 in reverse. Passengers were starting to get mad, which led them to question the manner in which the  
27 crew was handling the situation. The same direction of movement continued for 30 minutes, and  
28 then for another 30 minutes. In four hours, the train traveled backwards for a distance of 50 km (30  
29 miles), often stopping to remove trees that had fallen onto the tracks.

30 During the trip angry passengers started to move into the aisles demanding explanations of what was  
31 going on and wondering if they would ever arrive in Toronto. One passenger became a spokesman  
32 for the other passengers, copying down questions to be asked of the conductor. When questioned  
33 about the status of the situation, neither the conductor nor the crew provided answers: The crew  
34 knew nothing. The crew also showed no desire in determining whether any of the roughly 100  
35 passengers had any medical problems. It appeared that the crew was afraid of causing a panic.

36 Given the response, or non-response, of the crew, and the fact that the food supply had run out at  
37 around 11:00 a.m., the passengers decided to organize themselves and rebel. One of the main  
38 reasons for the lack of food was the failure of Via Rail to restock the pantry before the train left  
39 Ottawa. In defense of Via Rail, one reason for this could have been the fact that there were only  
40 about 100 passengers on the train, indicating that the train was running well below capacity. A four-  
41 car train set, with an engine, a local car, a Toronto car, and a First Class car would be able to carry  
42 over 200 passengers.

43 As the passengers went through the train asking about health problems, they discovered that two  
44 passengers were diabetics, that one male passenger recently had a stroke, and that one woman was  
45 8-and-a-half months pregnant. It was also discovered that there was a medical doctor on the train,  
46 who's assistance was required when a female passenger fainted. The passengers also wanted to  
47 make sure that at least babies, children, and diabetics had food.

48 While the lack of food was a major concern in coach, it was not as bad in First Class (called Via 1  
49 service). It was discovered that these passengers were served chocolates to help stave off hunger  
50 during the trip. This was not the case for those in coach. The food cart from the First Class section

51 also stayed in First Class – the contents of the cart were not offered to the rest of the hungry  
52 passengers on board the train. The supply of hot beverages, such as coffee and tea, also did not last  
53 for long. However, it was discovered that an elderly woman passenger had a clear plastic bag full  
54 of Earl Grey tea bags, but she refused to share.

55 The reason for the reverse movement of the train was eventually discovered. It was learned that two  
56 Canadian National (CN) freight trains, on the way to Montreal from Toronto, were stuck outside  
57 (east of) Brockville (about 2 hours out of Montreal) and that the 7:00 a.m. Via Rail passenger train  
58 out of Toronto was stuck behind the freight trains. The engineer of Train 43 had been told to back  
59 up to pick up the eastbound train, which had been stuck since the early morning. However, the crew  
60 of that Via Rail train had reached their legal work limit of 16 hours. Since the crew on the current  
61 Train 43 had already come from Montreal to Ottawa, they too would soon reach their legal work  
62 limit of 16 hours. The passengers were getting very concerned.

63 After the Montreal-bound train was attached to Train 43, the passenger spokesperson on the Toronto-  
64 bound train went through the Montreal bound train and came upon a Via customer-relations manager  
65 on board. The two parties engaged in a vigorous argument, at the end of which, the passenger  
66 informed the manager that he would be pursuing the matter when he arrived in Toronto.

67 The customer-relations manager eventually got a Via Rail senior manager to allow the train crew on  
68 Train 43 to work beyond the 16-hour limit. The conductor of the train had not been able to  
69 accomplish this task.

70 The train crews of the two freight trains boarded Train 43. These railway employees had brought  
71 along their lunches. They were strongly encouraged to share their food, which included two  
72 tangerines, four pieces of pizza bread, a six-pack of popcorn, and a carton of milk. These items were  
73 given to the children and diabetics on board.

74 Most passengers went hungry until midnight. At this time, the train finally arrived in Kingston, a  
75 destination 191 km out of Ottawa that would normally take 1 hour and 51 minutes to reach. The  
76 passengers were provided with complimentary sandwiches on board. Paramedics also checked the  
77 health of the passengers.

78 When the train finally arrived in Toronto at 3:30 a.m. the next morning (i.e., Friday), Via Rail had  
79 arranged for the passengers to stay at the Royal York Hotel, across from the train station (i.e., Union  
80 Station). The Royal York hotel is a well-known, luxury hotel.

81 Upon their arrival in Toronto, the passengers were amazed that the trip had not ended in disaster.  
82 The crew informed the passengers that there was no procedural manual or plan of organization for  
83 what took place during this trip.

84 One passenger reflected on the nightmare that the passengers of Train 43 faced by indicating that  
85 he was glad it happened in Canada and not in the U.S., since Canadians tend to be somewhat less

86 confrontational. It was also evident that the nature of the situation drew strangers closer together;  
87 there was a feeling among the passengers that they had to help one another.

88 It was also noted that the train was carrying some eminent people: a Federal Senator and a  
89 parliamentary secretary. Were they in First Class or coach?

90 Calls to Via Rail by the Globe and Mail newspaper the day after the trip were not returned: They  
91 probably had other concerns on their minds.

92 So, just like the 3-hour tour on Gilligan's Island, the 4-hour scheduled journey of Train 43 turned  
93 into an extended journey, even without the Skipper!

### Questions

1. Identify all of the major marketing theories and concepts illustrated in this case.
2. Explain the behaviour of the crew and other representatives of Via Rail from the point of view of customer relationship management.
3. Explain the behaviour of the passengers. Did they behave appropriately in their role as consumers?
4. Assume you were the crew and the management of Via Rail. How would you have handled the situation?
5. From an attitude model perspective, how would you ensure customer retention with respect to the passengers who were aboard Train 43 during this infamous trip?
6. How does the concept of crisis management apply to this case?

**Source:** The majority of the facts in this case, excluding the table, the questions, the map, and the additional commentary, are drawn from the following article: Gadd, J. (1998, January 10). The great ice storm: 'It was almost like the Titanic' - Passengers trapped on 18-hour train journey organize own medical care, beg for food from crew. *The Globe and Mail*, p. A1.