

EXHIBITIONS - A LESSON IN PROFESSIONAL MUSEUM PRACTICE

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Introduction

Through the medium of the notes which we have compiled, we hope to show just what our society has achieved through becoming involved in exhibitions.

History

Firstly, a little history; The Tramway Museum Society of Victoria became involved in exhibitions almost by accident when the Melbourne Model Railway Society asked if we could display some model tramcars for the International Convention of Railway Modellers in March 1970, to coincide with the Annual Moomba Festival. The project mushroomed into a public display which ran for five nights and attracted over one thousand visitors. In 1971 we returned to the same hall in Malvern with an expanded collection and by 1972 had raised the standard of presentation considerably as we built up a stock of display aids. After our next presentation in 1973 it was felt that a change was required and so the following year we moved to a new venue at Kew.

The display aids were not left idle between Moomba exhibitions. The photographs, models and relics were utilised at other functions such as historical rallies, fetes, and shopping centre promotions.

The horse car operation at South Melbourne in March 1975 filled the traditional exhibition weekend in that year, but presentation of smaller displays continued.

By 1976 we were growing tired of the mammoth effort in mounting our own functions which involved organising halls, publicity, etc., as well as the contents of the exhibition. The decision was taken not to run our own exhibition, but by drawing on the experiences of the previous six years we were able to present our most effective venture of all, containing our most popular items presented professionally in just 150 square metres, and seen by over twenty thousand people instead of our usual two or three thousand, and with less effort than any of our previous major exhibitions. We refer to the society's display stand at the Australian Model Railway Association's 1976 exhibition at Camberwell. A.M.R.A. had also commenced its exhibition in 1970 for the international convention of railway modellers and has built it up as a popular event on the Moomba festival week-end in Melbourne. The tramway museum stand won the prize for the best club display in 1976 and since writing these notes our 1977 stand has been mounted and came within half a point of winning the same award this year.

Lessons

The basic lesson from the past seven years has been that any display must be presented in a professional manner and must be aimed at the general public rather than at the enthusiast who may be prepared to overlook untidy surroundings. Incidentally, these comments apply equally to the museum premises and off-site exhibitions. Consequently, we are now engaged in a programme of up-grading the small exhibits presentation at Bylands utilising the ideas and equipment for our exhibitions.

Let us look at some of the specific matters concerning exhibit presentation:-

Models

Scale models are an excellent way of illustrating, in three dimension, those things that are too big to bring into the hall. (However we did have a complete cable-car end at Malvern one year). At the museum they can serve to fill gaps in the collection of full-size tramcars (for example - steam trams in Victorian collections). Although all scales are popular the general rule seems to be "the bigger the better". We have noted that our 1:24th scale cars, and to a lesser extent the O scale models don't carry the "toy train" stigma of their OO and HO counterparts.

Reliable, varied operation adds to public appeal. The oversize hand looming over the backscene to give the stubborn car a prod only encourages the viewer to poke his fingers at the cars too. Obvious differences between operating tram models should be maximized. The general public will not notice the difference between a W2 and W3 operating a shuttle service together but run out a Birney and an open-top double-decker and the crowds soon gather!

Decor

All layouts and tables on a stand must have adequate skirting to hide the forest of legs and heaps of empty boxes and other rubbish which invariably accumulates underneath. It is advisable to hang such curtains about 10cm above the floor to prevent careless smokers from sending the lot up in flames. (It may be mentioned here that some large ash trays and bins in the hall encourage tidiness too). Drapes can also be used to hide other unsightly fittings in the hall, but do not block access to switchboards, fire extinguishers or alarms. Pot plants may seem to be out of place at a tramway exhibition but we have found shrubs useful for camouflage and decoration. If possible a common colour scheme should be adopted for all signs, drapes, and display cases.

Lighting

Adequate lighting is perhaps the key to a well presented display. Forget about desk lamps or flourescent tubes and get some decent lighting. Lights on our 1976 Camberwell stand totalled 2½ kilowatts, mostly borrowed from a TV station, and as a result the stand caught the eye of each visitor as soon as he or she entered the hall. An adequate power supply is essential for this sort of undertaking.



Plate 2 - The display must be presented in a professional manner and be aimed at the general public
TMSV Exhibit, Kew, 1974

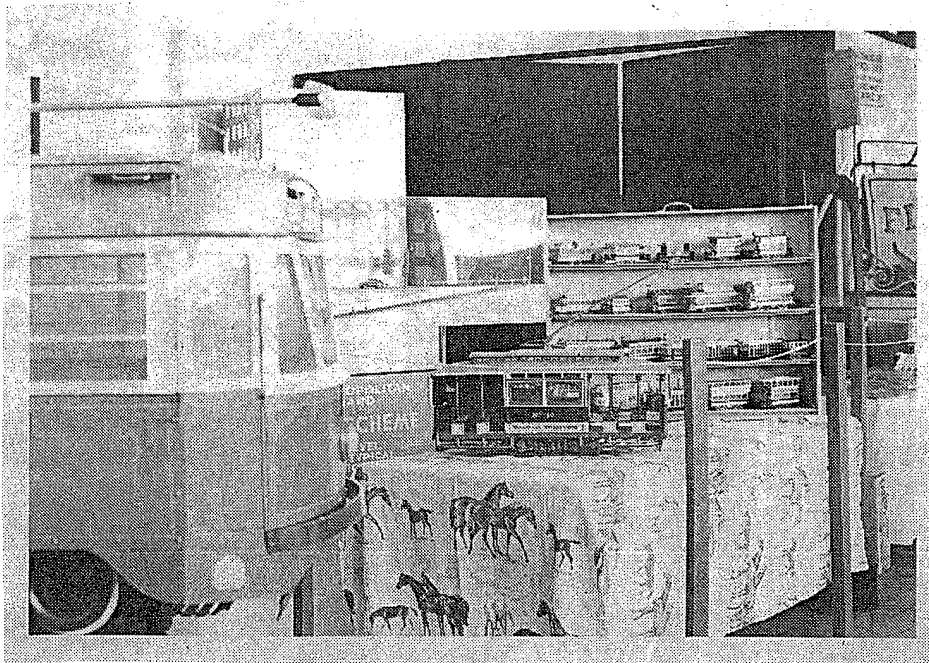


Plate 3 - Scale models are an excellent way of illustrating those things too big to bring into the hall.
Picture shows $\frac{1}{4}$ scale model of M. & M.T.B. 980, $\frac{1}{12}$ scale model Bendigo 10 and a selection of "O" scale U.K. trams.

Railings

Do not rope-off your stand, fence it off! All railings should be solid and braced so that they will not slide towards the displays as the crowd banks up. Although rows of chairs tied together are not ideal they are available in most halls and are hidden once the visitors gather in front of the stand.

Relics

A tramway museum is a lot more than just a collection of tramcars. Exhibitions are a good opportunity to overhaul and use some of the other items stored around your museum site. We have used uniforms, a bundy clock, signs, controllers, destination boxes and many other small exhibits over the years.

Labels

Relics, models and photographs all need labels. They must be neat and with relatively large print. Do not use typewritten signs; most people won't be bothered reading them. Keep your messages simple and short. With any more than one or two sentences, you will lose the attention of the reader. Avoid uncommon abbreviations, in particular the initials forming the name of your organisation. S.P.E.R., T.M.S.V., or B.T.M.S. are all just alphabet soup to someone outside our movement.

Insurance

Insurance could form a topic by itself. Most exhibition organisations obtain marine cover for models and equipment but check that it is adequate to cover the commercial value of hand-built items and the market value of antiques such as ticket punches and badges. See if your own museum public liability cover extends to off-site activities and extend it if necessary.

Time and Place

With limited resources we have learnt to be selective in accepting invitations and carefully balance the set-up/dismantle effort against the expected patronage. Generally we decline to mount displays at one or two day fetes unless there are special circumstances. We prefer functions at which we are permitted to sell publications but we never let the commercial aspect dominate our display stands. It is advisable to clarify any profit/expense sharing arrangements before accepting an invitation to participate in a function.

Benefits

Perhaps it is useful to list our reasons for becoming involved in off-site activities:

Income is the prime motivation, both from door takings and sales.

Secondly comes the inducement of visitors to call at our museum. For this reason large signs with the society's name, maps, and boxes of leaflets feature prominently whenever we appear.

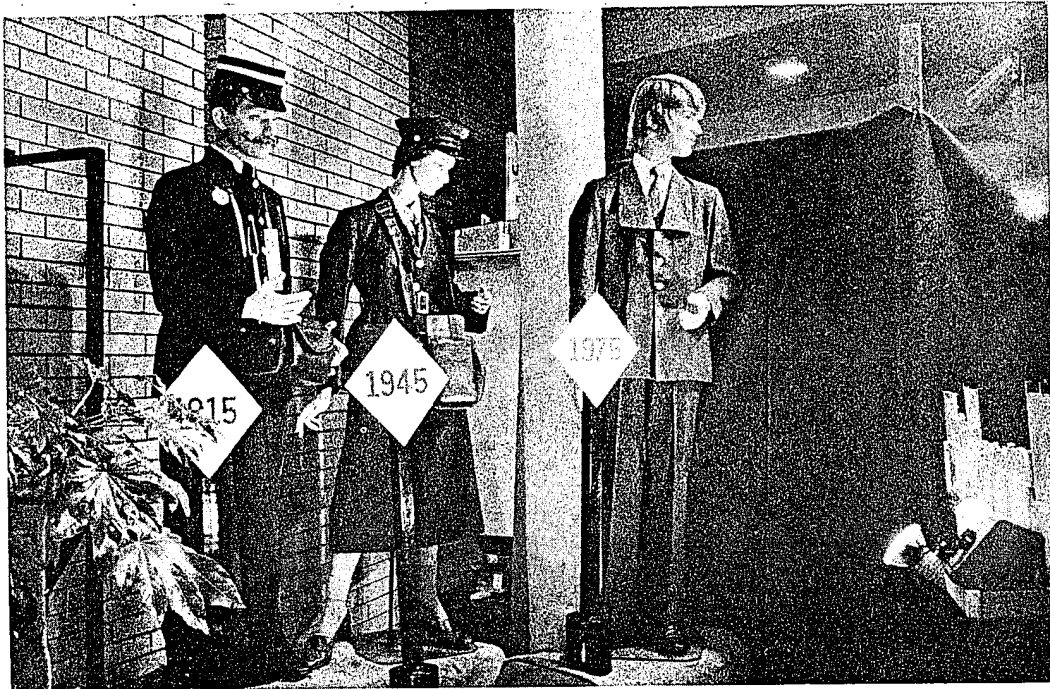


Plate 4 - Uniforms displayed on store dummies give an exhibit greater variety. TMSV Exhibit, Camberwell 1976.



Plate 5 - Models must be operated to maximise viewer interest. The novelty soon wears off for the operator.

Finally the mounting of exhibitions is in itself achieving our prime objective of promoting interest in the Victorian Tramway Heritage. There are two noticeable absences from the foregoing list:

We no longer consider exhibitions as major membership recruiting opportunity as the audience generally has only a minor interest in our hobby.

We do not run exhibitions to play trams. Driving models during open periods is conducted to maximise viewer interest and fun-operation is strictly an after-hours activity. Besides, the novelty of operating a two-minute shuttle service wears off after three or four hours.

Conclusion

In summary, the Tramway Museum Society of Victoria has found that presentation of special displays both at the museum premises and off-site is a worthwhile activity but to get maximum results a professional approach which considers the interests of the general public rather than the enthusiast is necessary.

We urge interstate museums to consider expanding their activity in this field and also to apply the techniques described to their permanent museum displays.