

OPPORTUNITIES FOR AND WITHIN MEMBERSHIP

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Introduction

After agreeing to speak to this conference, I put down the phone, sat down and asked myself, "What do I know about tramway museums?" Answer: apart from a couple of Sunday afternoons having rides at St. Kilda, not a lot. In other words, research was called for. I could have used conventional sources such as contacting the History Trust, but instead I asked around my variegated acquaintances and sure enough found someone who was a member. From him I borrowed the minutes of the last AGM, some odd bits of correspondence, the annual report, and a few copies of Trolley Wire. This filled in some more detail for me, but I am by no means an expert in your particular area.

On the other hand, I am well versed in the problems of voluntary societies, especially groups with historical interests. I can boil these problems down to the 2 M's: Membership and Money, they are not unrelated.

The Port Adelaide Historical Society has about 200 members and this figure has remained constant for some years. However, about three years ago, attendance at our monthly meetings began to decline. The worst was a meeting with an audience of 8 and when you deducted the 5 members of the executive... Well, we began to wonder if we dared to invite anyone to speak at our meetings.

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Naturally, the executive saw the need to act, and one meeting was spent trying to analyse what was wrong. We had a number of ideas, but we were only guessing: we had to ask our members - while we still had members to ask.

We fell back on the perennial chestnut of the questionnaire and without benefit of reply-paid envelopes - which we couldn't afford - received a heartening response of 40 out of 200.

The point I'd like to make about this questionnaire is that we took great care with the wording. We were feeling let down and that often makes people inclined to be aggressive and blame others. It's a bit of a strain trying to be positive when you feel as we did, but clearly we were missing something and we needed to know what it was, quickly. We remembered that being positive is good public relations. In other words, "don't whinge!". We explained the reason for our concern and then followed with, "What's wrong? What's right?" (It's important to know that or you may throw the baby out with the bathwater!). Here are some of our ideas: What do you think of them? What suggestions can you make?

The responses supported a number of things we'd guessed but also reminded us of things we had overlooked.

1. We learnt that our quarterly publication, the Portonian was very important. Contact with members is vital and we hadn't quite realised what an important piece of public relations the Portonian was. We have actually upgraded the quality of its production and tried to ensure that it has a balance of formal and informal historical articles, as well as careful coverage of past and future meetings. We tell members what they've missed and what they may miss if they don't come. This seems to have been effective. Attendance at meetings is now averaging 30 plus.

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It might be worth mentioning here that the Historical Society of South Australia produces two publications, its highly regarded annual journal and its less formal, but entertaining and informative newsletter. It's the newsletter that brings people to meetings and tours and keeps members informed. My view is that a society or museum must produce something of this kind, however cheaply produced or sporadic its appearance may be. Members who feel forgotten, don't remain financial.

2. People join societies because they want to support what you are trying to do, but age, distance, the nature of their work, and so on, may make it difficult to be present. However, they still want to give support and for a number of our members the only way they could do this was by their subscription. People like to feel they belong. We discovered that our range of subscription types was important. Because of the average age of the Historical Society membership in general, a Pensioner membership category is very important. Although there is little financial profit, the good public relations and word of mouth publicity generated by pensioner members who talk to others about the society, or what's in the latest Portonian are important to our society and it's continuance. We also maintain a Family membership category which is slightly less than the subscription for two adult members. I imagine that this category could be instrumental in bringing people to museums of any kind on a regular basis.
3. Historical societies because of the reasons they are formed are very concerned about history and preservation of places and items. We remember the historical aspect and sometimes forget the social one.

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I'm back to the idea of contact. Our questionnaire reminded us that our members, particularly the elderly ones, liked our daylight saving meetings which consist of a gentle stroll around some part of the district with some historical commentary and supper afterward. They also liked our approximately annual fundraising events; a Music Hall evening or a Film evening. For many, social contact was very important and to some degree it had been forgotten.

People also join societies because they like to feel useful and if they can give more support than just paying a subscription they will, if approached in the right way. I think tramway museums have the advantage of being able to use people's practical skills, something that's less likely in conventional local historical societies. However, I think too that your museums also have the defect of this virtue. The nature of the museum must eat time and money in restoration work, materials and overheads and if your membership is small, there is a great burden on a very few people.

Societies need to involve current members and recruit new ones and in these areas I have some suggestions. Often we really don't know much more about our members than their names and addresses but there are methods for storing and retrieving information quickly. With the help of my brother Peter, who until roped into this task was not involved with my historical interests, I used a database program to develop a system for both the Port Adelaide and State Historical societies. These databases list not only the most basic information but also occupations, areas of interest and will print out address labels

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which also remind the recipient that he or she is unfinancial - treasurers will appreciate that point I'm sure. This exercise did help with recruiting, Peter joined both societies.

I suspect that if you ask around you will find either a member, or someone interested in computing who will develop a system for you. It is another way of using people's skills and should also be started before membership becomes so large that initial data entry becomes too large a task; it then becomes a matter of updating files as new members join and old members resubscribe or fall by the wayside. Another point worth noting is that the larger the membership, the greater the need for fast searching capacity. You may well discover that you have members with writing skills, word processing skills or who are in media or public relations or design areas all of which could be utilised by your museum and you can find them quickly.

The other suggestion I would like to put to you is that you try to make use of your local schools. What happens when a school party visits your museum? Does the group get a tram ride and a talk and that's the end of it? If visitors take nothing away with them, then nothing but memory goes home. It is an educational truism that if we only listen we recall a mere 10 per cent of what we've heard. On the other hand, if we've had to gather information then recall is greater and if our hypothetical class has had to do a worksheet where they fill in answers about trams then that might get home, or it might of course get crunched up at the bottom of a school bag with several weeks worth of school newsletters.

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If students can take small items like postcards or stickers - kids love stickers, just look at their folders, books and bags - so much the better, there's more chance of the information getting home and the publicity reaching more people.

Is it possible for someone to speak at a history teachers' conference? Quite possibly there may be a number of teachers in your area who don't know about the museum but would love to use it. You might even find the right person to devise the worksheets mentioned in the previous paragraph. One of our most useful activities this year was the conference we ran for teachers and parents on the history of Port Adelaide and what we could do to assist schools - and what we couldn't do. (A description of the impossible requests I receive would fill a rather entertaining book). This conference, which was an official Education Department one, proved successful as a public relations exercise, membership drive and fund raiser. We even got nice comments on the evaluation sheets.

However, these are minor ways of involving schools. Schools in South Australia are able to play very direct and active roles in the heritage area; the same may be possible interstate, but I am unqualified to comment. I suggest that research on your part may be valuable. My own school ran a highly successful junior history course in conjunction with the Pioneer Village museum (Morphett Vale, South Australia). Part of the activities involved students in restoration work on various display items from that museum: a candle mould, a butter churn, pieces of harness etc. It added an extra dimension to our students' understanding of history. The school is also piloting a scheme of school-based branches of the National Trust, another exciting project for its history teachers. Possibly such schemes may be adaptable to your situations.

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The main suggestion I have to offer regarding schools relates to senior secondary courses. In South Australia it is possible that, with negotiation, students doing practical subjects: Metalwork, Woodwork and so on, may be able to undertake restoration work under supervision of a qualified teacher.

It is even possible that these students could receive recognition for their efforts in subjects that they are undertaking for the certificate they gain at the end of their Year 12 courses. This would have to be arranged with appropriate schools, but I'm sure that Mr. Ron Murphy of the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, and who is in charge of this area can assist South Australians. With jobs and apprenticeships difficult to find, students are often at an advantage if they can show involvement in worthwhile community projects.

In all of these suggestions about involving schools I have these points in mind: keen students who visit you may interest other members of their families; students who work for you may eventually become important adult members. In either case you have a source of potential members and if you don't have a student membership category, isn't it time you considered it? Whether these strategies gain you members or not, they should bring you good publicity, which is always worth having.

If I have to summarise what I've been trying to say, I would stress the following:

1. Contact with your members is important but so is the quality of the contact. Don't let them think you've forgotten them. Together with contact goes the importance of the social aspect of historical societies.

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2. A variety of membership types is needed, so that you can capture the widest possible range.
3. Don't disregard the computer as a valuable tool in helping you to keep track of members and their wide variety of skills.
4. Look for membership in a wide range of areas but especially among the young, as the larger and younger the membership, the wider the burdens can be spread and perhaps you will be able to maintain the high energy level that running a museum entails.

These are the main points I would wish to make as an outsider to the tramway museum community. I hope that they may be of practical use to you.