

## PRESENTING THE MUSEUM TO THE PUBLIC:

## THE NORTH AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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In North America most trolley or tram museums are organised under the not-for-profit statutes of the various local states. Further, the museums are recognised by the national government as tax exempt. In order to qualify for the tax exempt status, several conditions must be met by the museum organisation. One of the most important conditions is that the museum provide some benefit to the public at large. Under this mandate, museums are generally thought of as educational in nature.

Members of North American museums, at times, have a more limited view of the museum's purpose. The stating of the various goals is most important; but, even more important is the creative implementation of these educational requirements. The goals of the many individual members have to be guided and channeled to produce the overall picture that the public sees.

What are the outlets that museum energies can be channeled into for the public good? I will attempt to give you an idea of how this has been done by various trolley museums in the United States and Canada.

One of the first places that the general public encounters the museums is via the press. Since museums rely on the public for some portion of their support, publicity is an important way to let them know that the museums exist. By generating interest, good publicity encourages the public to visit and support the museum.

Most news staffs rely on prepared news or press releases. The media is far more likely to run a story if ready-to-run material is provided rather than asking a reporter to visit. I know that a well written press release can also be the germ of a feature article. When a museum event is forthcoming, write it up in an acceptable news style, telling the most important facts first. In the first paragraph, tell who, what, when, where, why and how of the event. Sentences should be short and to the point. The release should be typed double spaced with generous margins on top and bottom as well as both sides. It is a good practice to put a name and telephone contact on the release. This will encourage the press to follow-up if they want more information than that on the release. Another important aspect of issuing press releases is to meet the deadlines for the newspaper, radio, or television stations. The best release is of little value if it is not timely.

Another way to promote public contact has been the Membership meetings that museums hold. Meetings, open to the public, are the most effective with specific speakers delivering programs on trolley cars, the trolley operating companies, and so forth. The subject of a meeting should be strictly limited in its scope, so that the program will last from 45 minutes to an hour. It must be understood that many first time attendees at such a meeting can become bored by lengthy exploration of details. A logical extension of the museum's meetings is the creation of a speakers' bureau. This is one of the simplest projects to maintain once established. Within your home community, there are many organisations that require programs for their meetings. A sort of

travelling show can fill a double need, that of a program for one group and an audience for the museum's story. In any museum there are people who would perhaps prefer to do this sort of activity. The research and presentation of interesting programs can be enjoyable as well as profitable to any museum.

Yet another method of public contact is at community fairs or charity benefits. Many museums have had displays or exhibits at these events. Since fairs attract persons of all ages, a display can serve as a good means of publicising your museum and its activities.

What can a museum display? Anything that will tell about the museum and will compel passersby to stop and look is the primary requirement. The display should have something large enough and dramatic enough to be seen from a distance, and something detailed enough that when they walk over to look at it, there is something to justify their stopping. Pictures, maps and alike are eye-catchers when displayed in an interesting manner. Before and after pictures of city streets showing trams are of interest to spectators. The benefit of a display can be the enrolment of new members in the museum.

Historical libraries with special emphasis on trolleys and tram transportation have been established by several museums. As a museum collects historical material the need to protect and catalog it becomes evident. The way to do this is through a museum library. A library can be handled in any number of ways. One of the simplest and most economical ways is to make use of existing facilities. The use of space in a public or college library does have its pitfalls. In general the museum must ensure that the material remains intact and under museum control, and that it is not merged with other collections. The prime purpose of the museum library is to preserve and make available to researchers the material in the collection. Some North American museums have worked arrangements to have their historical material housed in college libraries. Others have made a special area or building of the museum the library. These libraries provide a valuable resource in both the industry history and technical information for future reference. Museums have received the donation of many corporate records and related material when the companies have cleaned house. A good catalog or index is an important part of any museum library. Once information is placed in the file, it is lost forever without a good retrieval system.

Up to this point, I have discussed several aspects of what the trolley museums have done as related to the public. In the United States and Canada as well as throughout the world, the main emphasis of railway museum groups has been the collection of rolling stock. At the museum site, the groups have assembled their collection of cars for public inspection. This is the major point of contact with the public and the bulk of the museum's efforts go into this phase of the operation.

Let us examine the "museum", from the public's point of view. As we know, the museum is engaged in the preservation of historic tram vehicles, but how does the public view the museum? Museums tend to become cluttered with much extra junk. While many of these items are needed for the operation or maintenance, they are often an eyesore. Care must be exercised to ensure that the public areas of the museum grounds are clean and uncluttered. One way to check this is to look over the site as if a visitor. Questions that we ask at my home museum are: "Is the grass mowed?" "Is trash picked up?" "Are the seats and other public amenities in good repair?" We give a general look at the overall appearance.

Most trolley museums are operating museums. I prefer to view them

as "Living Museums". It has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words! An operating museum is worth a thousand pictures!

The opportunity to enjoy a demonstration ride on the museum's line is a great educational experience to any visitor. A few simple rules that we have applied will ensure that the experience is enjoyable are as follows:

1. Operate the line in such a way that no passenger is inconvenienced.
2. Above all, operate it safely
3. Rotate cars so that repeat visitors can have a variety of experiences.
4. Use only clean cars. Areas around doors and steps should look good even if the body has other problems.
5. The public must be treated in such a manner so that they go away with a positive view of the museum.
6. Crews must look neat and be properly trained to perform the duties assigned.

By following these main points, we have served the public as well as promoted the museum and its goals.

But, while operations are a major focal point at the museum, the use of displays can expand the museum's message and give greater meaning to a visit. Let us then go into the aspects of a display.

A museum display should be an educational experience, just as riding the cars. Good displays will give an overall view of what the era you are depicting was like. A backdrop of an enlarged photograph that will give the context of how the various displayed items are use. An example is the use of enlarged photos of people working on the overhead trolley wire as the backdrop for a display of the various hardware items used. Items in a display should be arranged to effectively add to the message of the display.

Labelling of items should be done systematically and in a pleasing manner. The use of a standard material and colour for display labels is most important. The wording should be short and to the point, so that viewers will read them. Labelling is an important part of a display. A display with poorly done labels can lose its impact.

Displays may be set up in any number of places. One museum has set aside an area in the carbarn where displays are set up. Others have used cars that are not in regular use and areas in their visitors centres.

The final aspect that I wish to talk about is the area of publications and educational programs.

Publications can take many forms: Periodicals, monographs, or extensive histories. While most museums in the United States and Canada have done some publishing, they have in general been limited to periodicals that have grown from a newsletter format. While these are not aimed at public consumption, they often grow into visitor guidebooks and alike. Some museums have published annual books that deal with local trolley history and are sold to book dealers as well as through the museum gift shop. Two museums have published extensive histories of trolley operations in their locality. However, with the large amount of monies that are required for the publishing of large volumes, it is most often done by others.

Educational program aimed at civic and school groups has proven to be a growing part of many museums. Many local schools undertake field trips near the end of the school year and visits to trolley museums are part of this picture. Often the limiting factor having school groups visit is the availability of museum guides to conduct tours. At least one museum has a teacher's kit put together that extends the learning experience into the classroom before and after the visit to the museum site.

With this, I conclude my brief overview of the aspects of "Presenting the Museum to the Public" as viewed from the North American perspective.

I wish to thank you for your kind attention. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.