

SESSION: INTERNET HELP FOR THE VOLUNTARY SOCIETY IN 1998 OR NOT ON THE INTERNET - WHY NOT ??

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1. INTRODUCTION:

The Internet - *seems like something that's been around for a while - but not yet involved ? Or perhaps had a look - boring, too hard or not worthwhile - have a museum to run ?* As a commentator was describing the Internet recently, it took us quite a while to get a handle on the power of the Gutenberg Press, Radio or TV and it will take us a while to fully understand the implications of the Internet itself. We are still in its early days.

Of the 16 museums associated with COTMA only three have a home page and one a page within a personal page. Quite a few of the voluntary managed rail groups in Australia have them now.

The theme of this presentation is: By now; - why are you not on the Internet ? It is another communications tool - and one that is relatively cheap to operate, compared to formal advertising.

2. USING THE INTERNET

For museums like us, it is a communications tool - one of advertising your presence, giving details of your collection and coming soon, doing sales on-line. Having an e-mail service through an Internet Service Provider (ISP) generally allows the subscribers to have their own home page as well. Many ISP's allow 2 to 5MB of space for a personal home page. Such space allows for many photographs and graphics.

By having the e-mail link, a proposed visitor, especially an overseas one, can check things with you. For example, we had a German visitor recently whom when he advised us of his day of arrival train times, we spotted that he was using a Saturday timetable for a Sunday visit.

Most home pages these days will have a guest book, and a visitor counter. Now it is possible to add a system that will advise visitors when you have changed your page and gives them the details - a bit like a newsletter !

The Internet is not just for publicity; it can be used for many purposes such as membership enquiries, sales, research and presenting an exhibition. The latter item is becoming very important to the larger museums and libraries. The Museum of Victoria has established the "Virtual Museum" for this purpose and the State Library of Victoria has exhibitions of its holdings on line. At this stage this tends to be computerised reproductions of the exhibitions currently underway at the Library.

The Museum of Victoria in establishing the Virtual Museum said that one of the basic parameters was to increase visitation numbers - one of those dreaded management performance indicators or measuring tools. The State Library has over the last six years been scanning and digitising its photographic collection. Using its searchable database, the

BTM found some fascinating photos of the horse trams in Ballarat on it, some of which we had not seen before. We also found some errors in their cataloguing as well.

3. The BTM Experience

The Ballarat Tramway Museum's home page, courtesy of one of our Board Member's (Andrew Cox) personal e-mail via an ISP, went on line in January 1996. This contained extensive details of our tramway, operating times, our collection, Collection and Conservation policies, a guest book, a visitor counter, current news, extracts from our bi-monthly Newsletter "*Fares Please !*" and a vast array of links to like museums and similar organisations. The provision of these links allows a user to click on the name of the organisation (the link) and the Internet immediately (all going well) connects to that link. Most of the larger home pages have this mechanism and the cross coupling of these is one of the features that make the Internet so useful.

Another aspect of the Internet is the search engines - those have good points and bad points - but they are improving. If for example you do a search of "Launceston Tramway Museum" you will come along with a reference to the BTM home page - contained in an article we did on the LTM in *Fares Please !* That is, on our home page - subliminal publicity I would call this !

We found out early that there is a small town in California called Ballarat. At a May 1998 seminar about on-line exhibitions I was talking to the Co-ordinator of the Museum Studies course at Deakin University - who advised me that she recommends our page to her students. It is one of two in Australia who have their collection policies available on line.

Maintenance of the page can be a problem. Our Webmaster, with a developing family, moving homes, work commitments etc. has had problems in keeping it up until recently when paternity leave allowed him to re-do the front page and others as well. As future issues of *Fares Please !* are published, we intend to add them to our homepage within a couple of weeks of publication.

Recently as part of an Arts Victoria Grant, we installed a modem at the depot and connected through our local ISP, Netconnect. We will establish a depot section of the BTM homepage through this, allowing us to transfer information to and from our main page.

As I noted earlier, the first homepage was established via Andrew's personal page. After a holdup of some time we managed to obtain our own organisational URL name - btm.org.au that is now a lot easier to use than the previous one. The page is now hosted via Railpage Australia who hosts many other rail-oriented pages on their server free of charge. It is this use of hosting mechanisms by voluntary museums that can be seen around the world. Another good example is the TTMS which is on-line via the Tasmanian Rail Page, maintained by the ARHS Tasmania.

Many voluntary operated museums now have their own home grown pages, often hosted on a personal homepage or via another organisation. A specific person who has an interest in both the Internet and museum generally keeps them. The content does need to be controlled however, by the organisation and this can be done by simply showing someone in the Board a printout of the proposed content prior to loading it on to the Internet. A control mechanism is necessary, as it does have the name of the organisation attached, it is the same as a letter or a newsletter. However, it is relatively simple to address.

4. Australian Museum On Line (AMOL).

The AMOL project commenced about two years ago. The project's goal is to increase the access to the collections and resources of Australian Museums via the Internet by 2001. There is a National Directory of Museums, with over 900 Australian Museums listed. This

list includes most, but not all of the Australian based tramway museums. A searchable collection database, links to other museums and to a forum for museum workers.

The objectives of AMOL are:

- provide a single search of museum collection information across multiple, disparate and distributed databases
- Allow individual museums to retain ownership and control of their data
- Minimise the set up and maintenance costs for museums involved and the need for technical expertise to run the system
- Allow for future developments such as 3D and moving presentations of images - video etc
- Maximise the flexibility of software choice.

The AMOL web site is <http://amol.phm.gov.au/AMOL> where you can register your museum. The project is co-ordinated by a national committee with servers in Victoria and Western Australia. The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney is doing the actual day to day management.

5. How to go about setting up on the Internet.

First get someone to write the homepage. Difficulty No. 1 you may say - cut all that code etc. understand how to do it, what on earth is hypertext markedup language - HTML ! When I first saw Andrew labouring away in the early days, I said this too. But there are now programs available that allow you to assemble what you want to say, put the pictures and graphics in the right spot and then convert it HTML for you setting up all the links etc. etc. No doubt this is a bit inefficient coding wise, but they do work.

As an example, I set up a COTMA homepage giving details of the organisation, member museum details, logos and the programme for this COTMA Conference in about 7 or 8 hours work. This was the first time I had ever done anything like this. Most of the work was spent in assembling the material to do the page. The addresses of the various museums, logo scanning, scanning the programme etc. took the time, not the actual setting up of the web page itself. The program we used was Microsoft Publisher. However there are many others. It was placed on the Ballarat ISP last weekend and tested.

The page itself is simple, basic, no complex graphics, moving things or sounds etc - at this stage ! It all depends on what your needs are, the simpler pages give name, address of the organisation etc, and maybe that's all. For a museum I would expect the opening times, some details of your collection and some current news, along with a note when it was last updated. Your contact details on the first page are important. People have said to me, could not find an address or phone number, and then could not be bothered searching for it. Treat the first page like your letterhead.

At the 1996 COTMA Conference, Les Stewart spoke of the need to own your own web page and own the information in it. Third parties, with all good intentions, can place information on their own page but this can be wrong or out of date. This requires someone to continually search and check the information and then try to get it corrected. The most important sites are those which give primary information about your museum, e.g. AMOL, local tourist pages and those who offer a directory type service. It is like your white pages phone number being wrong.

If your page has links to other museums etc., these must be checked every so often, as others will change their addresses and not advise you, even if they know that you have

their address on your pages. It is important that your page be kept up to date in this respect.

Of course you could go out and get someone to 'construct' your page full of nice graphics, colour, bells and whistles, etc. These can cost big money, but given the simplicity of setting up a page, it is not recommended. Puffing Billy's homepage is probably the most elaborate of any of the rail based organisations and it is part of their publicity machine. However there are some poor examples by organisations as well where, in my view, things could have been done better. The old KISS principal often applies in this medium. You must keep the users in mind too. It all depends on the resources available to you and what you want to do. Over time, as we understand the medium better, the usability and purpose of web pages on the Internet will change.

6. Some final points.

You have no idea of the type of people using your page. Don't expect a huge number of "hits" or accesses to your page. Such hits could be someone just "surfing" around or someone actually looking at what to do in your area and has found the page. Or it could be someone doing a school project on transport.

A few organisations in Australia have commenced selling via the Internet. The BTM have had a couple of orders via e-mail or ordinary mail as a result of our page. It certainly is not yet big business, but it can grow. Internet transactions via credit cards are something completely outside the scope of this paper, but by the next conference could be an item on the agenda.

Can you have too much on a page? - Yes in some respects, it all depends on how you organise and place it. In the case of the BTM, the placing our Collections and Conservation Policies on the Internet was like this at first, but provided some content which people with a need were accessing. Organising a home page is quite an art and many organisations with large membership bases, e.g. the professional institutes, provide extensive documentation on their pages which can be downloaded for reading. These pages also provide search engines for searching their particular topic.

There are facilities available where visitors to your pages are able to leave their e-mail addresses so that when updates to your pages are made they are informed. This provides a cheap mailing list for contacts, donation drives etc. Writing the letter and sending it out is relatively cheap. This is an area we have yet to fully explore.

It is possible to have an Internet site without having an e-mail service. There are groups on the Internet that will give free web space, e.g. www.tripod.com and www.geocities.com and you can get free e-mail addresses. However I don't know how good these services are.

One site found while writing this paper was on geocities entitled "Victoria's Provincial Tramways of Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong". Alan Bradley, BTM historian, found at least 10 significant errors on it. This is one of the problems of the Internet. There can be a lot of "junk" and a lot of wrong information. The problem is of everyone suddenly being able to publish their thoughts or what they think is correct. This is good reason for a museum to have its own site, as it provides an authoritative site for information. One would assume that the data was correct before it was loaded to a museum owned site.

7. Conclusion

It is hoped that by the next COTMA Conference, all museums will have their own home pages. Given the development in the last two years, it is not difficult. Have you a younger member who has the ability to set one up, but needs the go-ahead and information? To place it on the net at low or no cost, you may need to find someone to help you out but this can be done.

The BTM is planning, resources permitting of course, to keep the COTMA home page up and running and give details of the next conference in Ballarat. We are thinking it may even be possible, given the hardware, to have some online sessions.

The COMTA address is: <http://www.netconnect/~btm/cotma/>

The Museum's home page address is: <http://www.btm.org.au/>

Our e-mail address is: btm@netconnect.com.au

DISCUSSION:

Graeme Breydon suggested that all museums advertising include an internet address for people to seek further information.

Graeme also suggested that comments placed in the 'Guest Book' are important.

There is a need to protect against unsolicited e-mail junk.

The COTMA page costs \$10 to \$15 a month to operate.

Background photos can be a problem in that they can render text too difficult to read. Check your own site on different PCs to ensure readability.

Ensure that comments about your museum or system made from other sources are correct.

John Radcliffe indicated that images (photos) and titles can move out of line/sequence.