

# ICONS, Trams and Tourism

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## Summary

Some tourist ventures work well as it becomes a local icon, others not so. This paper looks at the reasons behind Icons, how to try to overcome the problems if not one, and to look after the customers.

Have you ever wondered why some groups succeed with the public whilst others battle on. You know, you have an excellent collection, a good operation, but still the crowds don't come. You battle on, hoping for the day when it will all change.

From my experience in Tourism and being a member of several transport societies, it might never happen unless you consider you organisation's position.

Firstly, it's been an automatic success, an ICON, just because your organisation is the major tourism venture in your area. If you don't believe me, examine any tourism brochure on the two Victorian provincial cities of Ballarat and Bendigo. Both have excellent collections, street running (less in the case of Ballarat), but if you read any publication such as Tourism Victoria's Goldfields booklet, it is Bendigo Trust's *Talking Tram* that gets the full-page picture of its trams. This is due to the fact that they are part of the main attraction in Bendigo, i.e. Central Deborah Mine and the Golden Dragon Museum. Thus the Bendigo Trust's trams are the ICON tourists wishing to visit Bendigo remember as the must see and travel on.

In Ballarat's case it is Sovereign Hill, the gold mining township and museum, the new Great Southern Woolshed and the new Conservatory at the Botanical Gardens are used as Ballarat's ICONs and get free publicity in tourist brochures.

Secondly does your organisation's operation, if not an ICON, be part of a tourist destination.

Take for example the paddle steamers on the River Murray. There are several places where they operate, but not so successful as Echuca's former river port. Tourists including myself travel to Echuca as a destination to enjoy the port facilities and older buildings, the pokies across the River, but it always includes a river cruise.

I can recall as a member of AETM St. Kilda in its earlier days of operations, the museum site was in the arse end of the earth, situated off a main road on a poorly maintained road to a place that possesses a pub, a pile of weekenders and a mangrove swamp. That was bad enough, but the museum site was virtually next to evaporative salt-water pans. Nobody except the proverbial

gunzel would venture out there, but once the District Council of Salisbury plus other authorities saw the potential of St Kilda as a destination, i.e. a beach resort for the northern satellite suburbs of Adelaide, the museum's future was enhanced. With a tramway between the Museum and St. Kilda, the AETM was part of this new tourist destination.

Whilst the Kilmore Horse Tram operation could have been considered an ICON in Kilmore and therefore should have prospered especially as the only regular horse tram operation at the time in southern Australia. Kilmore although not much further from Melbourne than the Dandenongs and Puffing Billy, for Melburnians, Kilmore wasn't considered as a destination. Had there been a development of other tourism activities nearby, the Kilmore Horse Tram operation would have been a success like the tourist operation at Victor Harbor South Australia.

Thirdly if your organisation is not an ICON in the town or the city, investigate ways that your organisation can integrate its activities with other tourist operations. For example, Ballarat Vintage Tramway can't beat Sovereign Hill, so its actively participating in the call by Sovereign Hill's Chief Executive to expand its route from the Gardens to Sovereign Hill. In March each year, Ballarat hosts the 10-day Begonia Festival. After being ignored virtually for many years by the Festival organisers, despite it being in the area for 52 weeks of the year, for the past three festivals, the Museum has acted as a public transport system for the Festival by moving the visitors from the parkland car parks to the centre of the activities.

Fourthly, become entrepreneurial with your fleet. Have them available for charter operations not just for enthusiasts, but coach tour operators, be they tourist coaches, day touring, Probus or pensioner groups or day care patients of old people's institutions. Remember, these are often the tourists who utilised the trams as part of their social history. Give them a tour of the depot and a bit of morning or afternoon tea. These groups are often looking for a half or full-day destination and are prepared to pay for such service and add to the coffers in souvenir purchases. You might just be lucky with one of these groups to offer you a worthwhile piece of memorabilia.

Running such operations on a week-day is difficult for organisations that are run by volunteers, however, due to early retirement schemes, rostered days off etc. it is possible to select at least one suitable day per week as required.

Again, what about the odd wedding party now that most weddings are not conducted in churches. Advise your local marriage celebrants, of your availability; its good to network.

Similarly you possess a vintage collection of tramway vehicles, make sure that media or film crews know about your existence so they can be hired for period films. Ballarat Vintage Tramways have been immortalised in the film, *Getting of Wisdom*.

Fifthly, gain added publicity in the media from TV networks and newspapers that cover at least the state, if not Australia, or maybe overseas markets.

Some ideas that you can use to achieve tourist awareness—Bendigo Trust, Ballarat Vintage Tramways and AETM Adelaide have operated frequently their vehicles on a public system. BVT's effort to join Bendigo Trust to operate on the City Circle tourist tramway in Melbourne was fully supported by the Commissioners for the City of Ballarat who provided finance for its design and painting in the City's colours.

The recently completed ex-Melbourne tramcar by SPER and now operating in Christchurch NZ will work in two directions, prompting both Australians and New Zealanders to visit SPER's operations in the Royal National Park. Lets hope when the light rail now being built to Darling Harbour is completed SPER will be able to gain publicity from the operation of an R or an O on the line at its opening. One can only hope!

Additional media publicity can be gained by contacting your local tourism and development department to include your organisation's operation as part of a visiting media visit; or one of those specialist TV programs such as *Great Outdoors* or *Holidays*.

Despite my memos as such as a part time Tourist Officer here in Ballarat the local Tourism Board has yet to realise the unique visual story they have of publicising the new Conservatory in the Botanical Gardens by arriving at the venue in Horse Tram No. 1.

Sixthly, we have COTMA as an umbrella organisation for all tramway groups in Australasia, but as most of these are scattered throughout Australia, there needs to be more liaison with other transport groups. Having recently viewed the *Tracks* brochure by the Council of Historical Tramways and Railways of South Australia, how about looking around yourselves for any likely tourist circuit for tourists interested in transport or industrial archaeology.

I've spoken to Steamrail Ballarat re this idea as a pamphlet for all the Central Highlands Regional Victoria. Within the confines of Ballarat and Bendigo there are three tramway operators, three railway operators, Maryborough railway station precinct and Anderson's Mill at Smeaton to mention a few. Such a brochure not only highlights specialist interest groups in a suitable tour, but it also provides destinations for those people wanting a half or day trip from their home.

Finally, remember that the other matter that can make or break your organisation, its members. Twenty five to thirty years ago when tramway systems closed, a group of enthusiasts, historians, lovers of industrial archaeology banded together to save collections. Because of the 'fire in the belly' of these new operations, the excitement generated by the new volunteer, many of the projects were well supported financially and in numbers riding the trams. Those days are over, so each Board now has to retain its members involved with the public to be tourist friendly. Yes! We are part of the Australian Tourist Industry and as such our members need training in hospitality and tourism.

Every visitor who enters your museum, depot or travels on your tram is in themselves a potential advertising medium for your organisation. Welcome them aboard, Australian or New Zealand style (forget the Americanisms like "have a nice day!"), don't let them wander haplessly, or ride a tram without them feeling that you wish them to enjoy the experience.

It is a well worn adage in the tourist industry that a satisfied customer tells three others, but a bad experience is told to ten other potential customers. No tourist organisation can afford bad publicity.

Whilst there are courses of a day's length, such as run by Telstra and Aussie Host, their costs are prohibitive for voluntary organisations. Maybe, the attendance of one or two members to one of these courses can be the catalyst for designing a training program for those members in contact with the public.

Just running a tram up and down a set track these days won't keep the tourists etc. who come to 'ride the rails', we have to follow all the other sections of the Australian Tourist Industry by lifting our game and that can only be done by in-service training of our volunteers. The public now expect this service. Neglecting this aspect of your mission and business plan will see your numbers decrease and a collection lost to other organisations here and around the world which appreciate tourism and heritage.

There are no simple answers or text books to describe how to run a successful tourist operation, but maybe these few comments will help COTMA members re-examine their operations from the viewpoint of tourism and ultimately success financially and maybe even become an ICON.

### Discussion/Questions

Ron White: the Glenelg tramway has become an icon in Adelaide, so the AETM has to develop an identifiably separate approach at St. Kilda. It has developed joint promotions with the Mangrove Walk, and has also developed a series of special event days—for example the forthcoming St Peters – Glen Osmond nostalgic day for residents of those suburbs.

David White: the TMSV has developed a "package" using its historic buses encompassing not only a visit to the tramway museum, but also other historic tourist venues around Kilmore. The package is marketed to charter groups, Probus clubs etc. The main advertising is by "word of mouth".

Les Stewart: is the concept of "icon recognition" linked to seven day-a-week operations? Can we break through the barrier of weekend operation to seven day-a-week operation using a mixture of paid and volunteer staff? It is quite unsatisfactory to run an occasional weekends eg the first and third of the month, as potential visitors will not be bothered keeping track of when the museum is open.

David Critchley: have we identified the image we wish to portray? It will create expectations and we must ensure we meet our visitors' expectations. (eg that of a large steam locomotive on the front of the brochure, with the arriving visitor being told "we can't afford to run it very often, and not today").

John Phillips: we have approached tour operators to say, we would be prepared to operate seven days a week, if tour operators are prepared to come, but they have advised that they simply do not have sufficient time after visiting Sovereign Hill for any more than a cup of tea in the Ballarat Gardens before they must return to Melbourne. The Gardens are the icon, but the tram is there.

Bob Merchant: the Japanese tram has attracted a lot of Japanese visitors and "generated its own traffic".

David White: a recent German rail enthusiast was very impressed to be greeted by a local speaking German.

Jim McCrum: the tourist industry always tries to talk to incoming tourists in their own language.

Phil Bertram: we are striving to show our own culture to foreign tourists, not reproduce their culture.

David Critchley: but if initially we start from their culture, we can lead the foreign tourist across to our culture.

Bob Merchant: we have been getting an increasing demand to take wedding pictures on the trams.

Richard Gilbert: an alternative we have found is to provide refreshments to wedding guests on a tram trip while the newly weds are having their photographs taken in the Gardens.

Richard Gilbert: sometimes a simple cheap attraction is memorable to the visitor—for example a hole in a cardboard cut-out of the front of a tram, through which the visitor puts his/her head for a photograph while seemingly running over a body on the track.

Jim McCrum: is there scope for making revenue from copyright of photographs taken of our trams?

Phil Archer: copyright resides with the person commissioning the photograph.

Richard Gilbert: we are selective with advertising—we decline the opportunity to advertise during the Begonia Festival as it would not attract any more visitors and the festival goers will find us when they get there.