

## **PROMOTION AND PROPAGANDA**

### **Some Ideas on Public Relations**

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I was a little unsure of what I should speak about today, however I make my living at the theatre, and public relations is one of the main things I'm on about these days.

Now, sitting in the lines of your volunteers at your various museums, there is a treasure trove of talent, and it is amazing just what we can do. However, we are somewhat locked into a tradition, that is to look upon our railway or tramway in terms of our hobby alone, and the Hell with everyone else. I have detected this attitude all along the line because the most important people to us we tend to ignore.

The most important people we have are not our members, they are the people who turn up each week with money in their hands, who pay the fares to allow us to perpetuate the hobby we wish to pursue.

Preservation has gone through several stages. We all started not knowing where we wanted to go. When we started off we all had a dream. I wanted to preserve a railway, you wanted to preserve a tramway or tramcar. After years of effort, we opened the thing up, got something to go, then yelled to the public "Look, we have something going, come and use it". The public did and they got onto it. They came for one reason, nostalgia. Nostalgia for an old steam train, nostalgia for an old tram. That was 25 years ago. The people who come in today are not interested in nostalgia, they come to buy what we are selling, and what we sell is entertainment.

Entertainment is the means of making people happy, giving them a good time. These days there are many forms of good times available to people. Cast your mind back 25 years, just what could you do on a Sunday? Now there are countless activities that occur on a Sunday, and these distractions are our competition. Not only do we compete with the football or the pubs or the pictures, we now have to compete with other people that got into our field, and often people are doing it commercially.

Now if you were to take yourself out of Sydney on a Sunday and, say, visit Old Sydney Town where their total commitment is to recreate 18th Century Sydney Town. Being a commercial operation, have a look at what they are presenting, have a look at their product. If they did it the way some of our museums did it, if their staff decided to ignore the customers and lounge about, talking amongst themselves, while the customer walks by, ignored, perhaps ready to buy something, you could be sure that they would be dismissed in quick time. They would not be concentrating on the essential essence as to what is there. And the essence there is giving the customer a good time and making the customer want to come back. This comes down to what is public relations. I'm afraid to say that in my experience with most of our voluntary organisations. This is the attitude that predominates.

Why is this so? I suppose most of us go to our museum because it is our hobby, it is our form of recreation, we go there to be with our mates and it's much nicer to talk to your mate who you have not seen for the past three weeks. Meanwhile, the customer with spending money in his pocket walks past, puts his money back in his pocket because no one asked him to buy something. The customer goes away with the impression that it was not a bad place, they had quite a collection of old bits and pieces, but would have loved to have someone tell him about the stuff.

So I would like to suggest to you that the most important people we have are those people with money in their hands, and while we are at the museum, on duty, we should forget our own social intercourse, have that after 5.00pm over a beer, and concentrate like mad on that essential person, the customer. Give them a good

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time. Men come onto your property and they are keen to see everything. They want to see behind the scenes. Do any of you open your workshop and run conducted tours? Now that's a glorious saleable item. It may be a bit of an untidy place with a few blokes painting, but most of the men that come onto your site and dead keen to look under a tram, particularly if there is a bloke there, screwing up a nut who will take the time to tell the visitor why he is screwing it up. Man will stand for ages just watching this. It's another way of talking to people, of giving them a good time.

I saw a lovely example of this applied PR on a railway in England called the Dart Valley Railway. Some of you may have heard of it or visited it. At Buckfastleigh, you pay your money to get inside the gate and spend the day wandering about inside. All the volunteers have their own pet projects going on about the place, and they are working on them for themselves. Now there is a path connecting all these projects, and the volunteers are instructed that if a visitor stops and asks a question, they must down tools and have a conversation with the visitor. It is one of the conditions that is applied when members take on a task. It's perhaps a slightly different situation there as people are mainly working on their own engines, and the Society only provides the space and workshop facilities. However, this interaction with the visitor is a condition when engines are restored at the Dart Valley Railway. Incidentally, they also managed to make between £25,000 and £30,000 a year just collecting money from people coming through their gate.

As well as selling a good time, we are also trying to make our customer come back. Have a look at how your tramway rates with your competitors, how do you want your tramway to be seen. We now must make a point here about growing up, and we as preservers must grow. Peter Macinnis from the Powerhouse explained that he has the benefit of a big institution that is subsidised, and has the advantage of paying people to do the things that volunteers find unpalatable. How many of you fellows really want to turn up on a weekday and make a bunch of disinterested school kids happy. I feel we must look at a volunteer enterprises and ask ourselves the question, how can we take our show much further? Have we any more time we can give?. I think we are all full of ideas, but can we find the time to do them and can we find the expertise.

Maybe as part of this PR exercise it could be worth our while to spend some money and bring in someone who can help us. Most of us are caught up being the operators and not being the promoters. To have someone unconnected look us over may be a way to help us enhance our operations. Am I touching a nerve there? Perhaps I'm being provocative but the case is, we are there for our enterprises and our enterprises must grow.

We no longer have nostalgia to rely on, we have to take our enterprises out into the real world and fight our competitors. We must also do some work on how our tramway is perceived by the customer. Who is our audience, who are we reaching? Have you ever surveyed your visitors, or do you just open the gates on Sunday and see who shows up. Of course, who is prepared to go around with a pen and paper for six weeks asking people questions? That is the problem, that type of activity is boring in the extreme, and you are continually thinking about the fun you are missing out on not being able to take proper part in your hobby. But it must be done.

How much money do you spend each year on advertising? How can you people to come to your activity if they don't know about it. Don't be frightened about putting money up front because you should budget about 15% to 20% of your income towards advertising costs. But if you do advertise, you must monitor how well the money is being spent. If you spend \$4,000 on advertising, you can be sure that you will bury \$2,000 of it. No one will tell you which \$2,000 you buried, but the essential thing to try and work out is where best to send your advertising money, and how effective the result is. Here is a lesson. If you place an ad in the paper on Friday, ask everyone on Sunday how they found out about the place. You might find that you buried that money.

The secret is to work out where to spend your advertising dollar and when. For example, I would not spend a cent in Winter. There is too much competition for the place known as the fireside. I would not spend too much over the Christmas and holiday season, because they will come anyway. Perhaps place a few ads to tantalise. However, your normal PR and word of mouth will get them in. The right time to spend is when you are running at about 75% capacity because your money is more effectively spent trying to raise the 75% to 95% rather than trying to raise 20% capacity and bringing it up to 25%.

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Now to effectively advertise, it would be worth your while to consider finding a good publicist. Pay them a retainer of \$300 or \$400 a month to handle the advertising and to make sure that there is a press release about you in the papers every week to let people know what you are doing. Now if you cannot do this yourself, it's worth slipping a retainer to some publicity orientated woman to do this for you. What ever happens on your tramway, day by day, is of interest to someone, particularly your local paper. Every week there is something that has happened. You might have raised some money, a new tram may have rolled out of the shed, a member has bought a new tram, your annual financial statement may have come out. A press release to your local paper will get you plenty of copy and it does two things for you. Firstly, it spreads around the district that you are there and secondly it makes the locals aware that you are an asset.

Consider extending your hours of operation. At Puffing Billy we made a loss last year, and we succeeded in turning it around, and how we did this was by throwing conservatism to the winds and opening for seven day operation. It is astonishing how many people are out on the roads Monday to Friday looking for a good time. We started off running on a Thursday, I notice the S.P.E.R. is starting to do this, because we thought that would be the best day for the bus companies, then extended this to Tuesday and Thursdays and last year further extended to daily operation. On analysis we found that we only operated an extra 80 trains in the year. That year we had a loss, the first financial loss for a long time. We analysed the thing and found that we had a rainy day every weekend of the whole year. But when we looked at our weekday figures, we realised that if we had not been running seven days a week, our losses would have been 200% greater.

When I started off seven day a week operation, I concentrated on parties, and parties are fickle. Sometimes they find the bus too expensive to get to your attraction. Slowly we found the pattern of school activities changed and we started losing our school parties. What started to build up were the adult parties, the "Bussies" and now we end up with no less than three parties a day, plus some school groups and up to 300 blow-ins. It will probably get to the point where we will have to run a second train just to handle the blow-ins. Now these people are running around your city, looking for a good time, and you should be running seven days a week to grab them. If you cannot get volunteers to man your trams, why not try staffing the things with people who wish to pick up a few dollars during the day. You may end up paying out \$50 or \$100 to pay them, but you could be bringing in \$200 to \$300 through your door, including the lolly sales.

Advance sales, especially with groups, is a good money earner. People are becoming used to buying tickets in advance and it is now easy to do. Take the example of someone who buys tickets in advance, and on the booked day it snows. You can still run your tram and you have got their money. Even when the weather is fine, the customer who has paid his money will come, but you then get a chance to sell them an ice cream or a postcard. So give some thought to that. Not only can he get his ticket in advance direct from you or through an agent like Bass, travel agents could also sell your tickets. Now travel agents are into selling tickets in advance. They may take 10% off the top and put it in their pockets, but you do not have to sell the ticket, they have sold it for you. Remember also the travel agent does not get a piece of your ice cream or souvenir sales. Do not be frightened to let a piece go to someone else.

Now take the bus party. Thirty people get off and go about having a good time. What happens to the driver? You must look after him. The Talylyn Railway in Wales has a separate little room for bus drivers. They all know they can get a meal and a good cup of tea and they know they will be looked after. The bus company also knows it is on a good thing because they are getting a 20% commission off the top as well. They submit the fares they collected, less the 20%. It might not be the full fare but at least you did not have to sell the ticket. So always look after the bus driver, he will bring someone back to you. It is another form of PR.

Now another question. What will our customers pay? I have this dreadful fear, and I guess it stems back to the conservatism of the volunteer, I think we are under-pricing our product. Now we all throw up our arms and say "What about the struggling family man?". Well, the poor family man, if he does not spend it with you, he will probably spend it at the pub. Now that family man, if he does exist, is not going to come to your enterprise because he cannot afford the railway fare to get there, so forget about him.

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I think we are underselling ourselves. I believe you are looking at a form of entertainment and we should be charging a price commensurate with what we are offering. I tried in the theatre years ago to increase patronage by lowering the price. The result I got at the box office was "that was cheap, what's wrong with it". There is a funny sort of inverted snobbery we have in ourselves. None of us really likes shopping at Woolworths, do we? You would rather shop somewhere else and pay a few cents extra because it has a 'bit of tone'. You like to be seen shopping in the right places. It's the same thing with us.

I reckon we are all underpriced for the product we have. Think hard about that one because, if you do put your prices up, you will have to provide that extra service to justify the increase. Forget about meeting your mates, forget about discussing whether to paint the W2 pink or white, you are there to serve the customer. You are there to bring in the dollars to pay for the pink or white paint. Have your social intercourse after the business is over.

Another thing to think about is this. Very often we think we are only selling one thing, that is a tram ride. Now when you go to Old Sydney Town and you are not tied up with an activity, what do you want? You want amenities, somewhere to sit and rest, get a meal or a cool drink, a clean toilet and perhaps a souvenir or some memento to take away. These things are something other than your principal attraction. You will take note of these amenities, then see the attraction. Now have a look at your own place, because it does not matter who goes to see your attraction, it does not matter how good your attraction is, when the customer walks out your gate, they will judge you on two things, the quality of your food and the cleanliness of your toilets. The tram ride of the train ride are secondary in the mind of the customer. The lasting impression is how he was treated as a human being while he was there. What was the amenity, was there a smile on the face of the person that met him, were they able to answer his questions and were they willing to spend time with him. These are the important things.

What we must be doing in this hobby is carrying on the glorious pastime of preserving those relics. We have it written down in our mission statement that we are there to keep these things for posterity. It does not say we are there to be tram drivers of track layers or painters. Those are just the peripherals to allow us to keep these things for future generations.

The days of volunteerism are passing. We should therefore be gearing our operations for the next step, to become more professional and use our volunteers to support that professionalism. Once you have competition of the standard we are now seeing, take for example Old Sydney Town, if we are not careful they will overtake us. They take in the big dollar and spend the big dollar. We take in the little dollar and we don't have much to spend.

Well, I've magged on, has anybody got anything to throw back at me?

**Tony Griffin (SPER):** What is Puffing Billy's commercial attitude to competitors in other areas, such as the other tourist railways? Is it an attitude of 'we'll assist you if you'll assist us' or is it a case of all or nothing? I understand there is activity at Geelong and also some east of Melbourne. I don't have all details. With competitors in, say, a 200 mile radius of Melbourne would your attitude be to assist them or to be completely separate?

**Phil A'Vard:** There is room for all, room for all. Puffing Billy only carries about 185,000 people a year. That is a tiny proportion of what Melbourne's, Victoria's, population is. There is room for all of them. If it came down to it, it would be survival of the fittest. We help those other organisations in terms of labour and equipment, stuff like that. In terms of selling your product, each has their own technique. There is no joint marketing plan across them, it might be a question of scale in that case.

We got tied up with the Australian heritage parks organisation, which is worthy of your consideration because they are becoming, in two senses, a marketing organisation jointly right across the nation and also a very useful buying organisation in terms of souvenirs and similar products. This is how we can help the other

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smaller groups. If they want to get postcards, instead of them buying thousands of postcards we arrange with them to get one of our run of twelve. So we print eleven postcards which we pay for and we send them the other one so they get them without the heavy outlay in that case.

Getting together and selling yourselves is obviously a good idea. Take Wales for example. You've all heard of the Great Little Trains of Wales. That is a consortium of five narrow gauge railway companies that came together and set themselves up as a group marketing lobby. Now, it's not a bad idea if the various tramway groups got together for the same thing. That's something you can settle yourselves. Get together and produce your own joint brochures, buy your own newspaper space as a group. It doesn't quite answer your question but if they need help, they can come to us and we will give it to them. The amount of technical assistance that goes out the door is quite solid.

**Tony Griffin:** If they want help in an area which commercially could disadvantage you, what would your attitude be?

**Phil A'Vard:** I don't see how they could disadvantage us in our commercial area. Most of them are a long way away from us.

**Tony Griffin:** Most are physically far enough away that they are tapping a different market?

**Phil A'Vard:** Yes, take the boys out at Mornington. Their market is the tourist that visits that area, is encouraged to visit that area by the continual promotion that goes on in that area. That essentially is their market. They are not taking away Melbourne's market. Our surveys show that Puffing Billy is very likely parasitic on the eastern suburbs of Melbourne so they are not touching us at all.

**Tony Griffin:** If the other group was tapping the same market what, then, would your attitude be?

**Phil A'Vard:** That is a little different, as my commercial attitude is survival of the fittest, basically. But my heart says how can we help these guys. My way, this is Phil A'Vard speaking and not Puffing Billy when I say this, would be to give them every help I possibly can, knowing the row they have got to hoe. I can't speak for the management.

**Michael Kerr (THS):** When I visited Puffing Billy about four or five years ago, you had five engines in steam. Now you have three. Is that one of the results of seven days a week operation in the sense of wear and tear on equipment? We are running seven days a week and we're finding tremendous problems maintaining track, maintaining vehicles, keeping them on the track seven days a week. Do you have the same problem and can you give us any help, other than full time paid crews.

**Phil A'Vard:** The minute you start to raise your operating days per year, your costs are going to go up, but your income is also going to go up, so it is worthwhile doing. That is the decision we took. You do reach a level of maintenance on the darned things where they are pretty right. As you put greater demands on them, you compensate by putting capital into that particular part and you hold them there so your operating costs do level off and your income goes up. It is a decision we took on that basis. We looked at it, we thought we'd try it for twelve months then evaluate the situation. We found that income went up enormously and the result was quite satisfying.

We came to the conclusion, after some costing, that if we could run the train and it only had eighty people on it, that was sufficient to pay off the overheads, the cost of running that train, and every seat above that was that much off the overheads. We have something that you haven't. We have the fixed cost of twenty staff, so every dollar over the cost of the train is a dollar off the cost of that staff.

**Michael Kerr:** What you also appear to be doing is reducing the amount of running traffic or the amount of running vehicles at any one particular time. Is that so? [Yes, that is so.] So your maintenance or upkeep becomes limited to a lesser number of vehicles including steam engines. But what maintenance and restoration you are doing is pretty intensive.

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**Phil A'Vard:** One of the beauties of our computer ticketing situation is that you can adjust your loading to suit the traffic on the day. You can take three cars off and put them in the siding and not burn that much coal and not wear so many carriages out. Which is exactly what the railways are doing with their interstate and intrastate trains. Ffestiniog have done that. They have a control room directly above their offices which has a monitor connected to their ticket selling machine and the train controller up there can see instantly how many passengers he's got and can adjust the train load accordingly.

**Bill Kingsley (BT):** You were talking about under pricing ourselves. Now, two of our museums in Victoria, and you would be familiar with both, rather than exist at a single site, operate as street tramways, and they are Ballarat and Bendigo. What we often find, especially in Bendigo, is people getting on the tram and immediately comparing us with the prices on trams in Melbourne. They have had a Travelcard or a Neighbourhood ticket in Melbourne and expect our prices to be the same. We can't match that, we're not government subsidised, but we have to lift our prices into the tourist bracket and often get this comment in return.

**Phil A'Vard:** Do you tell them they are riding a tourist tram? [Yes, always.] We faced up to this quite some time ago with Puffing Billy because people used to ride on a train. They'd jump up and down - 'How much to ride on a train?!' - and our comment was that you are being entertained, how much do you pay at the pictures? We had to ride that storm. It was a tough one to take and will be a tough one for you to take. You may lose a few customers but you will get them back if you keep in mind what they want; let them stand beside the driver, give them a little bit more than they get on the trams in Melbourne. I know your problem, it's a tough one, but you will wear it.

Well, gentlemen, I've been given the wind-up sign. I didn't think I would get this far. Thank you for your attention.

The session closed and delegates adjourned for morning tea.