

Our Museums - Who Are They Really For?

By Don Evans, West Coast Railway Association

As I have travelled around and visited many different railway museums during my tenure as an ARM Board member, one of the most frequently asked and debated issues is who our target markets are. This has been debated widely at my own museum as well, and thankfully so, as it has become something we are starting to act on and think about constantly in our development and design.

Most of us are concerned with the long term viability of our museums (at least we say we are), yet the formula often seems all too the same - a collection of railway rolling stock typical of what we experienced in our lifetime, often in our younger years past. In essence, we have built facilities that tell our story, our experiences of our collective pasts, and thus presentations which are essentially aimed at the aging railfan.

This is not too surprising, as it is this interest and these experiences that drive us in our passion for preservation - of our favourite locomotive, streetcar, passenger car or whatever. We want to ensure that what we experienced, the stories they tell, and the impacts they had on our past and in creating our present are preserved for future generations. These are noble and relevant things for us to do, and they are done with the right motivation for preservation. However, by the very fact that they are based on the past, our museum's futures are inherently at risk.

With all of the very best motivations and intent, we often are still a long way off from doing what needs to be done to ensure success long after each of us are gone. We should be asking ourselves constantly how to create stories and exhibits that are aimed at our future markets, and how to develop business models and long term operating funding to keep our museums going. These questions can be quite challenging, but at least if we start working on these issues now the chances of long term sustainability and success are improved.

Museum Markets

There are a number of definite markets that we should be working on and have plans towards continuing development. There are many different approaches, of course, but to me these can be broken down into several sectors:

The Nostalgia Market - remembering the past and re-kindling past experiences. This is where most of us today come from; I know for me it was travelling on the streamliners of the 1950's that got the bug going, and is why I am passionate about preserving my favourite F unit. This segment is probably what we do best today, as we preserve rolling stock as it was when delivered years ago for others to enjoy. The nostalgia market is very viable today, and a solid one to present, but as we age and depart this earth it will decline. Even today, the number of visitors who have actually ridden an intercity train is dropping, while new roles such as commuter rail are growing. Even nostalgia won't stay the same!

The Family Market - entertaining and engaging. This is a good market to focus on today, as long as we focus on its continual evolution. Families are changing and evolving as well. The family market requires more than just trains....for us we have had great success with our restored and furnished heritage home, and a site design that is broken into Community, Industrial, and Natural zones, offering different interest focuses for different family members. They are able to discover things together, and share their own memories, interests and stories while on the site. We have also

discovered that this approach helps put the impact of the railway into clear contexts. We can tell the story of the community of the past, drop a mailbag at the station platform and discuss how the mail came, how the newspaper came in a way that the parents remember. Children discover new things and learn because they have never been to a railway station before or thought about how these functions happened in years past. Suddenly the RPO becomes more than a restored artifact and turns into an instrument of family connection.

The General Tourism Market - diversity in what we offer is the key. Again this is a staple market for us, but we need to keep involved and current in order to be an integral part of our tourism marketing and tourism attraction. This market brings us people from different cultures, countries, and locales. The initial impression that is created as a visitor arrives at our site is critical. They can very easily drive into the parking area, take a fast look at whatever is visible, and decide to move on. Our “front door” needs to be appealing and defining, and we need to show a maximum diversity of what we have to offer. Moving things are important - we discovered that having operating signals on our miniature railway crossing right at our entry was doubly powerful - people love the fact that the full scale lights come on and gates come down, to be followed by a small gauge train full of passengers crossing in front of them! (We viewed the installation as safety - guests see it as attraction!)

The Community Market - providing a facility that is used by the community as an event site. This is one of the most powerful ways to develop use of the museum site. Trains can be items of mystique, and having the opportunity to host meetings, company events, town council meetings, service club events that use the site as a community attraction not only gets people out who would never otherwise have come, it generates new sources of continuing revenue. One of our largest community events now is called Wild at Art - a partnership with our town’s Arts Council, where our shop building becomes a huge art gallery as part of the annual arts festival. This March, we had 42 artists and many live music performances set inside our main workshop - and over 6,000 visitors in the ten days of the show (in March!). We have further addressed this market by developing our new roundhouse as the Roundhouse & Conference Center - please come and see for yourselves at ARM 2009!

The Youth Market - presenting and learning new things in terms that engage our youth. The needs of this market are for things that grab interest - fast. Our youth is least likely to relate to what we preserve, so what we need is to find ways to grab attention quickly and give them things to explore in ways they are accustomed to. Here we need electronics - it is their medium, and an area not all of us (including my facility) are good at. We need to find contributors who can take what we have and put it into their terms. A tech whiz is needed, and using youth as volunteers to develop these is one way to engage them in what they know, yet expand them through learning about what we have to show. Size is a wow - our Royal Hudson 2860 is universally impressive as you stand beside it. But then, there needs to be more! We need to do much work here to develop our museums into a must see for those future generations. This requires fun, fast and visual information, and games - only then do we earn the chance to address inquiring minds and educate them.

Summary

Whatever we do, whatever our own goals and desires, they will not last if we do not create places that are chosen by a broad range of population sectors as a place they want to visit or to use for their events and functions. We need to always have this in mind as we work through our plans and our various projects. A solid and diversified guest base is a prime requirement for a successful future, along with a credible reputation for what we do and how we do it.