

The Public

By David Dewey

Theoretically, museums exist to educate the public on the importance of the past through the presentation of a collection, and the ongoing preservation, analysis, and interpretation of the collection's pieces and the people who interacted with them. Practically, museums must encourage public interest in their collections to generate support (MON-EY!) to keep the museums open and active.

In general, "The Public" will not flock to see something "educational." However, they do patronize interesting and "fun" attractions. If a museum can make itself appealing as a fun place to go, then it can generate public attendance, which then leads to support. I refer to the museum's actions as "subversive education," you invite people to your museum to have fun; while they are there, you slip in some knowledge. It is critical to remember to do some teaching while developing the "fun" displays; without the teaching you risk becoming an amusement park.

This brings up an extremely controversial subject in the museum field, referred to as "Fire and Smoke." The question is just how much entertaining is it proper for a museum to do to attract visitors? This is beyond the scope of this article, and I do not intend to delve into it -- but be aware that the subject exists, and that it will come up many times in the future. Railroad museums face it constantly when operating train rides (which in museum lingo we refer to as: "interactive interpretive displays" -- it sounds more professional and tells what and why we are running trains).

Attracting the public also requires your museum to be different than other museums, especially if you're off the beaten path. You might say that your museum should fill a niche in the public's leisure time activities shopping bag. At Portola, our founding niche was to be the repository of the Western Pacific Railroad's operating equipment, "The WP Lives at Portola." We are now expanding to cover other western railroad activity as a result of the interests of newer members and the public's changing interests. Few museums can survive without adapting to the public's changing inter-

ests; at the same time, few museums can afford to cater to every interest; trends must be carefully studied before implementing changes.

OK, we've talked a little bit about what brings the public to the museum; what does inviting in the public obligate the museum to do? First and foremost, it must provide a safe place for the public to visit. This can be very difficult around railroad equipment; the tracks themselves can be dangerous, tripping over, sliding off, etc. If there are hazards in the public area, they should be educated (there's that word again!) to recognize them. This can be as simple as a DO NOT sign, or a more positive, "don't do this because..." (like the cartoon safety posters), or as elaborate as an audio-visual orientation presentation (OK, a movie or slide show).

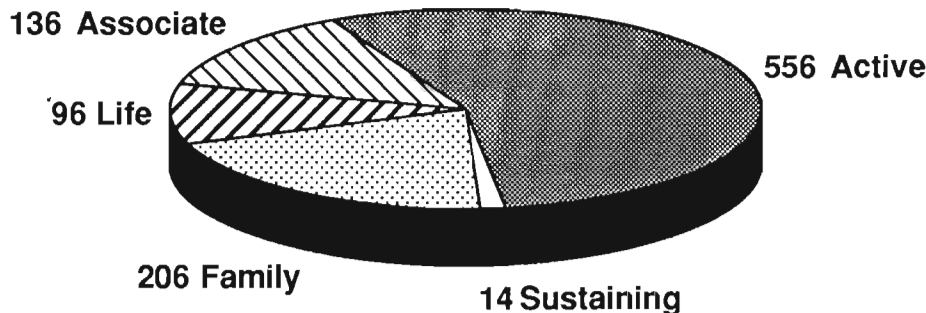
The public expects its museum visit to be pleasant; so, in most cases a museum wants what they see to be visually pleasant. This means that the visiting area should not be littered with junk; it should have an appearance that an average person would believe is orderly. By "average," I am describing someone without a special interest in the museum's field (in our case, railroads). As an example, you can have a supply of spare ties, neatly stacked, or just dumped around on the ground. Either way, the railroad enthusiast recognizes them for what they are: useful spare parts. The average person will see neatly stacked lumber, or a mess of old wood. Since the museum wants Mr./Ms. Average to come back and tell all their friends what a nice place it is, it is in the museum's interests to have the ties stacked (and it eliminates a safety hazard).

Amazingly, studies have shown that one important thing the public (especially children) wants to do when they go to a museum is to be able to buy something inexpensive at the museum which will remind them of their visit. Interestingly, the item doesn't even have to relate to the museum's exhibits!

We'll continue talking about the public next time. See you at the museum?

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as of April 23, 1993



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