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LONG ISLAND RAILROAD

Publicity puts it on the right track

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Not long ago, when the Long Island Rail Road was routinely threatened with its strike of the month, commuters were startled at being approached in Penn Station by mini-skirted girls with pamphlets in their hands.

The pamphlets were telling the commuters about emergency schedules should the strike become a reality. The girls were a nice touch, too. They were, in fact, a sort of symbol. They represented a new attitude for the LIRR, namely: upward and onward with better equipment.

It might seem odd that two such suspect institutions as the LIRR and the public relations mystique could get together and produce something of social value, yet this strange union seems to have in this case produced fruit.

One approaches the LIRR PR department with intent to scoff, but finds oneself reluctantly remaining to praise.

For under its new director of public relations and community affair, Hank Boerner, the LIRR seems to be expressing a new intent, to really serve the beleaguered Long Island commuter.

Boerner is a short, dynamic, youngish man who knows Long Island and the public relations business. A native of Hempstead, he did a hitch as a business reporter with the Long Island Commercial Review, then entered the world of PR as new director for American Airlines. As head of PR for the LIRR, he is

Suffolk and Nassau taxpayers are coughing up hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to pay for "public relations." This article, the last in a series, examines this lucrative field.



building a staff of professionals, and seems to be concerned not only with image but with the reality of improving the railroad.

He talks to reporters and others with a refreshing absence of what is sometimes called hot air, and sometimes by more vulgar terms.

"This old railroad," he says, "had operated the same way for 40 years. Forty years later, there's no growth. One lousy track all the way to Port Jefferson. Trains 15 cars long trying to accommodate this new growth, when no planning as done, and certainly no market research. Our market is on the Long Island Expressway.

"The Pennsylvania Railroad used the LIRR as a dumping ground. The whole purpose was to sell the railroad to the state, and PR then was to try to fix the baby up so it looked good and they could sell it.

"Three years ago the state took over and began a modernization program. Now we have a two-part PR job. One is to sell our employes on themselves and their ability to serve the customers. The employes have been doing a heroic job, but they don't know it. The carmen, keeping this railroad equipped with cars, their efforts can only be described as heroic. The conductors, putting up with abuse, operating cars that are older than most of the commuters.

"The second part of our job is to tell the customer what's going on; not in trying to con anyone. The whole message of this department is that it's a new day for the Long Island commuter. There's a new management that cares, new equipment arriving, we're extending electrification in Suffolk County.

"We don't need publicity. We are in the papers virtually every day; we are in whether we want to be or not. We work to get the news to the pipers and other media as fast and accurately as we can. We move objectively, we don't try to hide things, because if we hide them they'll come out worse. If we have an explanation we tell it; if there's an apology in order, we give it."

The LIRR's PR setup has a budget, Boerner says, of \$125,000 for this year. This includes salaries, printing and photographic expenses. The staff includes six professionals and one-and-a-half secretaries. The other half-secretary works for the president of the railroad.

Eaton Goldthwaite, who has edited several weekly newspapers on the Island, is now manager of community relations. His job is to talk to local groups and officials. The mayor of Garden City may want the station cleaned up; the mayor of Northport may want more parking; a group on the West Hempstead branch may complain about the condition of the tracks. Goldthwaite's job is to talk with these people, and try to get them what they want. He also works with weekly newspaper editors.

Lou Duro, formerly with the Long Island Press and the New York Journal-American, is charged with reporting to the radio stations. He starts calling stations, about 20 of them in the metropolitan-Long Island area, about 6 a.m. with the day's delays, cancellations and other catastrophes. After 9 a.m., he goes out and meets the announcers, discussing the problems of the railroad. He also is in charge of sports promotions: the marketing of special trains to Belmont, Shea Stadium, Madison Square Garden, fishing trips, and other jollies.

Dennis Leavy, a former Suffolk Sun reporter, answers inquiries from newspaper reporters and helps Duro with TV coverage.

Harry Prior, formerly with the Long Island Daily Review, is manager of publications. He puts out a new pamphlet called News and Views, which will be handed out to commuters periodically by the aforementioned mini-skirted girls, who in less glamorous moments are LIRR secretaries. The pamphlets are designed to cue the commuters on the latest trials, tribulations and upward yearnings of the railroad.

He also puts out a newsletter called The Inside Track, aimed to employees, to help their morale and increase their knowledge of and identification with the LIRR. There is also a revised company internal newspaper, and a proposed management newsletter.

The sixth professional, Mario Casale, is in charge of printing, photography, and production of the department's various publications.

There is, without doubt, in certain enterprises a definite need for communication with the public. Not merely are advertising and phony image-making so often identified with PR. The LIRR, of all places, seems to have begun to pull itself together with, of all things its department of public relations.



Mini-skirted girls help Dashing Dan
these new image-makers symbolize better equipment