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LIRR is losing its brash spokesman

By Bradford W. O'Hearn

In the dark days of 1969 when the Long Island Railroad was seemingly coming apart at the switches, Hank Boerner became its public relations director and he said most of his public relations colleagues thought he was half crazy. The rest thought he was completely crazy.

Today Boerner, who was once called the Ipana smile of the railroad, leaves that job to become the Pepsodent smile for the New York Stock Exchange. He will be replaced at the railroad by his second-in-command, George Thune, 42, of Levittown, a former managing editor of the Long Island Commercial Review.

In the intervening four years, Boerner, 36, who came to the railroad from a similar post at American Airlines, was cursed, cussed, compromised and complimented, depending largely on how many of the commuter trains were running on time that day.

But when he took over the job in the early part of 1969, the railroad's rolling stock was antiquated and literally coming apart, the commuters were disgruntled to the point of mutiny and the line was plagued by problems with some of its unions. All in all, the line had a very poor image.

"When I got there, there were three guys in the (public relations) department, running around answering phones, acting like firemen putting out fires," Boerner said.

Boerner set to work to revamp the public relations staff, beefing it up to its present 10 members, and to change the image of the railroad that was at that time the butt of jokes by nearly every talk show host in New York.

The ideas and the gimmicks poured forth: there were the Metro Mini Maids, railroad secretaries and clerks clothed in bright yellow and blue mini dresses who were used to distribute literature and information to commuters. There was the "Phantom Train," the 7:55 out of Babylon that made a triumphal reappearance clothed in a huge mask that covered front of its engine. Its reappearance was an occasion for a variety of media hoopla including the mini maids handing out free



Newsday Photo by Cliff De Bear

Hank Boerner, the quick-thinking PR man who defended the railroad in some of its darkest days, is switching to the New York Stock Exchange.

coffee and doughnuts, high school bands, celebrities and even flowers.

Frequently shooting quick from the lip, Boerner once said, "This railroad is a communications nightmare." Still later, after Gov. Rockefeller had proclaimed that the railroad would become "the finest commuter railroad in the country" within 60 days, Boerner faced the approaching deadline bravely and said that it would indeed become the finest in the nation. And then he added "But that doesn't say much for our competition."

Boerner and his staff persisted. They churned out new letters for the commuters telling about improvements that were being installed or planned on the railroad. A \$750,000 loudspeaker system was installed so the riders could be informed of train changes and delays. The internal newsletters were enlarged in an effort to instill more pride in employees about their work. And press releases poured from the public relations office announcing every new electric car that was added or station that was painted.

Boerner and his staff frequently clashed with members of the news media, especially during strikes, train crashes and other times

when the news about the Long Island Railroad was not always good. There are still reporters who do not refer to Boerner without using a preceding epithet. And many in the railroad's management staff, including, at times, its president, Walter Schlager, have been critical of Boerner for what they called his brashness.

But Howard Blankman, president of the Long Island Public Relations Association, gives Boerner high marks for his efforts on the LIRR. "I know him well and I think he did a first rate job, all things considered."

As for himself, Boerner thinks public relations—a much reviled sphere of business—is "a noble profession." He added, "I think that more and more the PR guy is moving to the forefront as the corporate conscience."

But he said that by moving to the Stock Exchange he will solve one of his most pressing problems: "At cocktail parties I never admit I'm the PR man for the railroad because everybody either is a commuter or knows somebody who is." But, after some thought, he said, "Maybe I'd better not say I'm with the Stock Exchange either since almost everybody has stock." /II