

Long Island Rail Road opened up honest communication with disgruntled customers

Public confidence in the Long Island Rail Road nearly waived before a corporate reorganization and a major PR campaign addressed the company's problems. The railroad rebuilt a positive relationship with the community it served by increasing communication through news releases, press conferences, newsletters, and pamphlets distributed to passengers.

No one should expect a busy transportation system to operate year-in and year-out without occasional delays and mishaps. This is especially true of such a complicated operation as that of the nation's largest commuter line, the Long Island Rail Road, Jamaica, New York (LIRR). Headquartered at Jamaica, New York, it carries an average of 260,000 passengers to and from New York City every weekday, operating 670 trains over 334 miles of track with 154 stations.

Nevertheless, for a variety of widely publicized reasons—defective new equipment, inefficient repair work, a bitter wrangle between repair crews and management, transfer of ownership to New York City's Metropolitan Transit System (MTA), political bickering, etc.—the situation had become extremely serious by the end 1968. Only six disabled cars a day were being restored to service and, with nearly 300 of the line's total of 774 inoperative, well over a score of trains were canceled almost every day. One, the 7:55 a.m. from Babylon, Long Island, to Brooklyn, New York, ran so infrequently that passengers and media all knew it as "The Phantom." By last spring, there was additional unfavorable publicity when several disgruntled passengers (who had to stand or who objected to unheated or dilapidated cars) were arrested for refusing to show their commuter tickets or pay for their rides.

Last July, MTA Chairman Dr. William J. Ronan announced appointment of Walter L. Schlager, Jr., as President and General Manager of LIRR. Although not well known to the public and LIRR's 6,750 employees, Schlager had done an excellent job running the New York City subway system and was considered of "proven competence in electric rail operations" (an important point because the LIRR was operating both diesel and electric lines and was planning to convert to all electric). Working with Schlager was a public relations department, newly reorganized under direction of Hank Boerner, who had taken charge of it

in March. He had appointed six assistant PR executives who, working with full clearance from Ronan, had developed personal contacts with and trust of media personnel and community leaders. PR effectiveness was evaluated at daily staff meetings (with staffers in the field participating by telephone).

By August 5, Schlager's conferences with the leaders of two key LIRR unions brought significant revisions in repair procedures. These promised a breakthrough in solving the equipment shortage and, on August 8, New York State's Governor Nelson Rockefeller, who had been drawn into the complex controversy, made the startling promise (taken out of context and headlined skeptically across the country) that "within the next two months the LIRR service is going to be the finest in the country."

A special section was set up to handle complaints (as many as 125 a day).

Riders were given copies of a periodically issued, pocket-sized folder, "News and Views," which posted them as to developments, explained the causes for serious mishaps, and reported what was being done to prevent similar delays in the future. These, written in crisp, clear style, invited complaints and offered speeches by LIRR executives before civic groups.

Arrests for refusal to pay fares (a crime called "theft of service") largely disappeared following a new procedure (recommended by Boerner). This is not to make an immediate arrest but to invite the protestant to leave the train at the next stop. Most have reconsidered by then.

The LIRR employee, newspaper was revised to an eight-page, tabloid-sized monthly, mailed to employees at their homes. It reports objectively on company trends and carries dramatic and eye-catching photos which, in Boerner's words, "help 'sell' railroad employees on themselves and the compa-

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ny." A bulletin, titled "The Inside Track," goes to New York City and Long Island officials.

Despite a series of mishaps during the thirty days after Rockefeller's promise, the foundation for progress was being laid. Daily repairs and inspections of out-of-order cars rose from six to twenty-eight and the backlog of disabled ones began to drop. To encourage continued employee cooperation, Rockefeller, accompanied by Boerner and a busload of newsmen, visited the road's repair shops and expressed his appreciation.

When the time came for the annual September revision of schedules, word reached Boerner that elimination of The Phantom was contemplated. He protested vigorously on the basis that this would mean "irretrievable loss of face for the LIRR." The train was retained and, finally, two weeks before the two-month deadline arrived, it began running again. Its return to service was the basis for an extensive celebration. Minimaids (a group of colorfully uniformed young women who had been trained to assist at functions and distribute printed information to commuters) dispensed free coffee and pastry at the train's point of origin and served as hostesses during the trip. The train carried many media personnel and dignitaries as guests and was headed by a mask-shaped banner with the message: "The

Phantom Rides Again." There were welcoming committees along the way; at one station a high school band turned out and, at another, there was a huge horseshoe-shaped wreath. Media response was tremendous.

Throughout the rehabilitation period, personal contacts and luncheons for media personnel were maintained and many interviews arranged. Special attention was given to on-line newspaper editors.

While it's difficult to prove whether Rockefeller's optimistic promise has been met, everyone agrees that service has been vastly improved. To quote Boerner, "It's been a year of crisis, an almost unbelievable year for my department. But we're off the front pages. For example, a recent day with twenty late trains drew only a dozen lines on page 95 of the *New York Times*."

Boerner and his staff are not, however, relaxing. They can spot trouble by watching how trains pass their offices and have a direct line to operating headquarters. And, each week, one member of the staff spends a full day riding the road to see what is going on. Boerner constantly reminds that PR can't hide a poor product. "When the chips are down," he warns, "it's an important part of PR to get the product improved."