

PR & THE LONG ISLAND: THE UPHILL ROAD FROM FOE TO FRIEND With a few exceptions, PR directors of U.S. railroads don't have much to do with passengers any more, except maybe to discourage them. One of the exceptions is the little (334-mile) Long Island Rail Road, which carries more passengers by far than any other and tries to make them happy. Its longest single run is 117 miles, and its shortest a mile. Yet despite the carrier's size and the fact that almost 70% of its 260,000 daily passengers are commuters, the Long Island's DPR Hank Boerner supervises some 40 people. They include a handful of public relations professionals who manage various aspects of the PR function (such as community relations, information services, publications, broadcast & press relations); a bevy of attractive Metro Mini-Maids (who double as passenger representatives); and the train information staff (including announcers).

The Long Island has seen many more bad days than good, no thanks to an onerous tax load, heavy losses on passenger traffic which cannot be cancelled out by freight income (less than one-sixth of gross revenue), and past associations with the former Pennsylvania Railroad, which considered it a poor stepchild. The carrier - and its PR department - has also lived through more sustained hecticness than probably any other railroad could claim or would want to experience, particularly during the Sixty Days to Remember just a year ago. It was on Aug. 7, 1969, that NY Gov. Nelson Rockefeller made the off-the-cuff promise that within two months the broken-down, disaster-ridden line - by this time state-owned - would be "the best in the country."

It was hard enough on the PR department before that bolt out of the blue - hard enough that the railroad was coming apart at the switches, that angry commuters felt they were risking their lives every time they rode to work & back, that newspapers ran daily scoreboards on accidents, cancellations, no-shows, and trains that were late arriving if they arrived at all. How PR and the rest of the railroad went to work overnight to make good the Governor's promise and calm commuter wrath is a matter of record (PRR, 10/13/69, p.1). So is press reaction. Said one prominent Long Island paper: "The LIRR, of all places, seems to have begun to pull itself together with, of all things, its department of public relations." ---

This is to report that today the 136-year-old Long Island Rail Road no longer looks its age, and that its public relations department - continuously active on a dozen fronts putting out new PR fires and preventing others - has, with the backing of an enthusiastic management, turned foe to friend up & down the line. For one thing, it now has a railroad to sell - a hard-working carrier with several hundred comfortable new cars, faster schedules, 92% on-time performance, extended electrification, a station painting & beautification program. For another, PR knows how to sell it. There are slide films for adults telling the railroad story, and for children on safety; Mini-Maids who ride the trains, pass out circulars, provide information, enliven railroad photographs; fashion shows aboard trains during off-peak hours to attract shoppers.

There are also fact books, commuter newsletters, and memoranda for opinion leaders. There's a newsletter for parlor car passengers and - in preparation - a Commuter's Handbook. Promotions and special trains tie in with top entertainment events...a "Rodeo Special," for example, with cowboys & cowgirls aboard, and a rock & roll group that drums up trade for a Music Festival. Local radio stations air contests offering tickets to special events and round trips on the railroad as prizes. On Aug. 29, Yankee stars will ride a flatcar on a special train and demonstrate hitting & fielding procedures as they roll down the line. And on the more sedate side, the Long Island also produces a weekly radio report on progress of the railroad's modernization program which is broadcast each Sunday morning.

No one may yet be ready to claim that the railroad is "the best in the country." But already, PR is spreading the word that it's the safest; and if it does become the best, no doubt PR will find a ready way of convincing Long Islanders that they're pretty lucky to have a railroad like that.