

Read This First

Summer 2010

You have in hand version 0.8 of a handbook for running regions and divisions. In the high tech world 0.8 is a version that you want to share with the users for their feedback, but that you know is not ready for prime time. That is exactly what you have here. It is our intention that we revisit it in two years and make it a more focused document.

We're going to give a copy of this CD to every Regional President that we can find. We hope that they will make more copies of the CD and give it to all their Divisional Superintendents, Directors, and any other officers. We hope that the Divisional Superintendents make copies too and pass them around. It is a kind of viral marketing. Hand it to someone and say, "Here, tell me what you think."

However, our first suggestion is, "Don't sit down and try to read the whole thing at one time." Your brain will numb and your eyes will go cross-eyed. Read parts that you are interested in or concerned about. Presidents and Superintendents should read about other divisions and regions, Membership Chairs should read the Membership section, the SIG coordinators should read the SIG part and the Education Chair should look at the education section. Once you have a handle on your section, read the other parts at leisure, thinking about what would improve your region and division. The whole point of this is to help you improve what you are already doing.

This project grew out of a call last summer in the NMRA Board of Directors for a book of "Best Practices" to be given to the Regions. In some ways it was more a wish than an actual plan for action. The Regions and Divisions Yahoo Group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/regionsanddivisions/>) which had started up a couple of months before decided that the best handbook would follow the motto of the FUBU Company (For Us, By Us) and decided that it could put out the most useful list of "Best Practices."

So this is not as a dictate from the National organization on what we must do but as a sampling of the activities that we already do "warts and all". Select ideas that seem appropriate and try them out. Change them. Re-arrange them. We have provided documentation, but if that is not enough, you can always contact the appropriate region or division.

Comment on activities you see here or add items. Post your comments on the Yahoo Group. This is intended to be a living document full of change and revision.

There will be a version posted in the members-only section of the NMRA website also.

Because it is a product largely of emails on a Yahoo group, you will find it pretty informal in tone. Some of the participants know each other, some don't. Some regions and divisions are over-represented and some are under-represented. We did what we could to encourage participation. I solicited every regional and divisional officer I could find an email for to join the group. Every regional President was informed of the existence of the group and encouraged to join by mailings from the National Headquarters. Once a part of the group we solicited responses from everyone. I have to admit that this a bit smaller sampling than I would like, but it is what we got.

I, as moderator of the Yahoo group, took the point on the project and recruited other members of the California Mafia like PCR's VP Pat LaTorres and Secretary Tom Crawford. Nobby Clark, currently the Atlantic Director, provided input both from his British Region and from a national perspective. We attached ourselves to the Communications Director Gerry Leone who has been helpful in shepherding the project and Al Lowe has watched over the technology section. Regional Presidents, Divisional Superintendents, Contest Chairmen and many others have responded to various questions posted on the Regions and Divisions Yahoo Group. Their responses and materials are what constitute most of this book.

The first thing that we learned was that the history and diversity of the regions and divisions that make up the NMRA make it very hard to specify how they all should function. The regions were an afterthought. Their relationship with the national organization has grown out of expediency rather than as a response to some administrative plan.

As Lisa Gorrell said, in her history of the first fifty years of the PCR, "In the early 1940s, the Rocky Mountains presented a significant barrier to attending National Model Railroad Association (NMRA) events in the East. This problem led to the idea of a region in the West, and ultimately resulted in the formation of the Pacific Coast Region (PCR)."

So the PCR was formed because people didn't want to have to travel east to enjoy the benefits of the NMRA. (Lisa's whole history is in the regional description section of the handbook which comes later) The British region was formed only about ten years after the NMRA itself and for reasons similar to those of the PCR.

As a result of the process that formed the regions, each is an independent corporation. Responding to both local laws and local needs, the structures vary from region to region. How the Board of Directors is organized is a simple example. In some regions, the BOD is the Superintendents of the divisions. In some regions,

Directors are elected separately. And in some regions it is a mix. Some Directors are elected “at large” and some are elected in geographical niches.

In the handbook, we have descriptions of a number of regions. The British Region is special because of the “ABC” model that governs it. The Pacific Coast Region’s description is quite fleshed out because of the number of people from that region who participated in the making of the Handbook and because it seems relatively typical. The Mid-Eastern Region is another region with quite a history and a lot of organization. It covers parts of seven states and the District of Columbia. It is quite well organized and has an Executive Handbook with bylaws, policies, position descriptions, a Division Superintendent’s Handbook, and a Convention Handbook. Both the Thousand Lakes Region and the Pacific Northwestern Region cross into Canada and are challenged by enormous distances. In addition to fully wrought descriptions three more regions have commented on specific aspects of their organization. These we present in the form of the emails that were sent to the Yahoo Group

The most important thing to be said of both the regions and divisions is that their purpose is to provide services locally. They were born of local needs and respond to local needs. Their focus has continued to be local.

Divisions are hardly mentioned in the national organization’s Executive Handbook. When they are mentioned it is mostly in a phrase like “Regional and Divisional”. Outside of saying that they should have two officers, there is very little to define either their structure or what they are to do. It does say that any national administrative costs that they bear can be, but are not required to be, reimbursed by the region out of the \$2.00 per head that the national organization sends to the regions for that purpose.

So the divisions are creatures of the regions and range from what amounts to single clubs to huge geographical regions. In activities they range from moribund to meeting monthly including those who sponsor train shows of all sizes and descriptions and those who take on responsibility for regional conventions. What you will find in this handbook are descriptions of many of the different activities that they do. None of them is as large and complex as the regions so all of their self descriptions are snippets sent as emails to the R&D Yahoo Group. Both as inspiration and roadmap we present Howard Goodwin’s “The Division IS the NMRA”. Recognizing that there are “moribund” divisions, we also present, from the NMRA magazine an article on how Cincinnati’s Division 7 came back from the dead. We can breathe life back into them

There are many supporting documents such as charters and bylaws that can be found in the files section of the CD that goes with this Handbook. Sometimes just a description will be enough. Sometimes you need the actual wording.

But just describing the various organizations is not enough. There are problems, issues, and concerns that face all of us. Membership, meetings, conventions, technology, education, layout tours, contests, all at one time or another is likely to have been a problem. Or we are sitting around having a beverage and batting around “There has got to be a better way to do this” with the members of some committee or other.

Meetings and conventions are a major part of what we do at a local level. Sometimes we do them as fundraisers and sometimes as a get-together for our members. Our section on “Meets and Conventions” includes the British Region’s excellent directions on how to put on a meet. It is a bit specific to them but full of ideas and small points worth keeping in mind. They have it well tied into their scheme for making a buck or two (Pound or two in their case I guess). The Rocky Mountain Region has contributed its extensive planning guide for their regional convention. If your region does not have such a guide you might seriously consider modifying this to fit your particular needs.

We have a number of the sorts of emails about conventions and meetings we noted in the description sections above. One is a well written review of a convention put on by the Mid-Eastern Region. It is interesting both to think about what the reviewer thought was important enough to include in the review and what he thought about those things at the particular convention.

Four Regions responded at length to a series of questions about their conventions:

1. How often? Once, twice, three times a year?
2. When? Spring, Summer, Fall or Winter. Why did you choose that date?
3. How many days? Two, three, four or five?
4. Venue? Club, hotel, convention center?
5. What do you do? Banquets, contests, layout tours, modulars, train show, clinics, videos, prototype tours?
6. Joint with anybody? SIG, Historical Society?”

One of our contributors wrote up quite an extensive guide to advertizing with a focus on getting your message on Public Television. There are also examples of print media.

As with all our sections, these are reports on what is actually being done, but not the final and only word on the subject. We really are interested in adding to what we have

Recruiting and retaining members is critical to the survival of any voluntary organization. We have not found the “Silver Bullet” but we have included a long section on membership. We start with comments from twelve different regions and divisions about how they see the problem and the sorts of things they are doing to solve it. That is followed by a couple of “Welcome” letters that are in use and finally, the full text of the Pacific Northwest Region’s extensive “Membership Retention and Recruiting: A Program for Success”. The PNR’s document is amazing for its breadth and ideas.

Contests and how to do them in a way that enhances our organization is another matter of constant debate. Do we want a rigorous contest with the Achievement Program standards fully applied? Do we just want a popular vote to see which we like best? Do we want our own regional or divisional standards? What will draw the most entries? What will draw the most members to the organization? I can’t say as we have the final answers, but we’ve done a lot of looking at the questions.

The whole question of the AP standards brings us to that program and education and member aid. We have a short discussion of those topics and a check list of things a Member Aid person should have at the tips of his fingers.

We have a section on interacting with the SIGs, historical societies and other groups. Here in the PCR our sponsoring of the LDSIG/OPSIG’s annual joint meeting has proved very helpful to us. It includes a section written for a couple of the SIGs for their use in putting on joint meetings. We hope that others can make the same sort of mutually beneficial arrangements with groups specific to their areas and interests.

We have a section, not as long as I would like, on layout tours and how people do them.

Finally there is a section on technology, present and future. One thing that everyone seems to agree on is that things are changing. Some things like Yahoo Groups seem pretty solid in their implementation. But our regions and divisions are exploring how to turn it to their use. Other social media like Facebook and Twitter seem to have value, but we are only just beginning to use them.

So there we are, a semi-complete handbook. But it is meant to be semi-complete. We know the world is changing so it is changeable too. If you have something to add, just send it in.

Bill Kaufman

Chief Instigator