Technology

There is a "Virtual NMRA" forming out there and we have to figure out how to harness it. Like all organizations that wish to be taken seriously in this day, all regions and most divisions have websites. They are terrific for static information that changes relatively slowly. Announcements of meeting sites do well on the web. Reports, videos of layouts, clinics, and prototypes provide good content for our websites that can attract and hold members.

But they are, as I said, kind of static and a bit, how can I say it, "old hat."

The social media, the Yahoo groups, the Facebook pages, the tweets on Twitter, are where people are meeting each other and interacting. This is where the virtual modeling world is being created. It is where all sorts of virtual activities are being created.

I'll get back to FaceBook and Twitter because Yahoo is what I know best. I have another piece on the PCR Yahoo Group in this section so I will try not to repeat that. What is important, I think, is the variety of purposes for which they are formed and the life that they have. I formed the PCR Yahoo Group in the fall of 2002 as a general chit-chat for the region. I don't know what I expected but it now has about 250 members and has accumulated over 7500 messages.

Just because I didn't want to see it die, I took over the board for the editors or model RR publications. It wasn't living up to the expectations of the then owner. It bounced along, not quite thriving, not quite dying, for a couple of years. With the contested National NMRA election, it evolved into a place to debate national policy. It now has 125 members and over 6500 messages.

These I just sort happened to be involved with. The first Yahoo Group I opened with a purpose was the Regions and Divisions group. I felt that the national organization was not responsive enough to the needs of the Regions and Divisions and started that Yahoo Group as a "self help" operation to share best practices. The Handbook that you are reading now is an outgrowth of that self help philosophy.

Other people are trying to use Yahoo Groups to do more than just natter. Nobby Clark is trying to get a British Region Operations Special Interest Group up and running. Probably the most ambitious at this point is Jim Six and friends effort to create a Michiana Division using a Yahoo Group as its primary communication tool.

The first page starts with a powerful statement of what they are attempting to do.

"We are about growing the hobby of railroad modeling in the Michiana area. Our goals are met through teaching, sharing, motivating, showing, . . . and most importantly, learning. This is implemented through monthly programs of workshops, clinics, guest presentations, seminars, etc. We are about hands-on participation. Topics include kitbashing structures, installing scenery, building benchwork, weathering rolling stock, locomotives, structures, programming DCC decoders and sound decoders, designing an operating layout, laying and wiring track, creating backdrops by painting and with photos, designing operating sessions, model photography, photo editing with Photoshop, creating working drawings (blue prints) with Sketch-Up, detailing locos and rolling stock, and even preparing a clinic or seminar using PowerPoint and digital photography."

But this is a statement that any division could write. It is not in the objectives that Michiana is ground breaking. They may be a bit bold in their statement of purpose but it is in how they intend to do it that they are working new territory.

The Michiana Division has a motto "Model Railroading in the Digital Age." They have set out to attract new, young folks to our hobby and believe that "embracing the new digital technologies and incorporating them into our hobby will be the single most significant way to make this happen."

Given that, they don't have any sort of snail mail communications. Everything is via Yahoo group or direct emailing. They say they understand that this excludes many but are willing to live with the trade-offs. Besides, they say, "most all public libraries offer free computer use and internet access, so folks without computer can go there."

One benefit of the online communications is the elimination of the "business" part of their meetings. Minutes of all meetings, reviews of completed workshops and clinics, treasurer's reports, etc. are via their Yahoo group or direct emailing as appropriate.

It has been interesting to watch as they have developed their concept. The traditional newsletter has been replaced in the division by the Yahoo group. The members have, in the last six months, posted more than ten modeling related articles in its files section along with links to them in the main body of its messages. Unlike most newsletters, other the members can and do write messages about the articles. The authors, being members of the division and thus the board, can respond about the finer points.

But, yes, they do have face to face meetings. After some scrabbling around on the board looking for a place, Michiana had its first meeting in South Bend with an agenda that included:

1. Introductions

2. What happened to the Calumet Division?

3. What is the Michiana Division and

how it came to be?

4. What are our goals and plans?

5. We are co-sponsoring the annual Great Lakes Model Railroad Symposium in April

6. What are you looking for?

7. Program: What is the NMRA Michiana About?

So here they are. They have a division up and running. Plenty of life to the Yahoo group. So what makes them NMRA? First and foremost, you have to be a member to participate. Anybody can read messages on their board, but you have to send in your NMRA number to post anything.

Secondarily, many of these are guys who have come back to the NMRA after years of absence. Jim poses the question to himself, "Why would I use the NMRA to help model railroaders when I have been so successful already via the internet and RPM meets and events?"

His answer involves a number of things including a sense that, while the RPM movement is a strong and viable way to do things, it is reaching limits based on its structure or lack thereof. Specifically he says, "The NMRA is much larger in numbers than any other group within the hobby. They are respected by the hobby industry and have a lot of influence - like it or not. My thought is to join the NMRA and work via them verses fight or ignore them. The catch is that the NMRA as it exists today will never accomplish what I believe needs to be accomplished and can be accomplished.

So, by joining and bringing a good number of like minded people with me I aim to shift the NMRA paradigm and make things happen. I cannot do this via playing the NMRA game as usual. Instead, I plan to create a division that is so different that people will ask what's going on? Can this really be the NMRA? I want them to say, crap(!) . . . I want to be part of this."

Maybe not all of us can bring this stance to our region or division, but the Michiana divisions efforts are worth looking at in some depth.

But Yahoo Groups are not the only social media evolving. Actually Yahoo has been around for a long time, it is we that need to evolve and figure out how to use it. What is evolving right now is Facebook and Twitter.

John Sing is trying to create some sort of social network campaign for the X2011 West convention. He has done extensive thinking and writing about it. I have edited some of his thoughts and efforts and included them. Right now on Facebook there are four things to connect with. The NMRA itself has a group that claims 667 members but not much activity. The Gateway division out of St. Louis seems similar. It has 39 fans, but not much activity. The British Region has 43 fans and a similar lack of activity, The Southern Utah division page has 29 fans and does seem to be being used to regularly make announcements of activities, but that is about it.

The NMRA webmaster posts Tweets on Twitter, so we have a presence there. Having said that, this looks a lot like

Facebook as far as us having figured out its utility.

YouTube is much better understood and used by our members. I have seen the sort of video I think we need on our NMRA website explaining how to use the standards. Gerry Leone has created very nice videos advertising regional conventions. Walthers has posted their 2009 preview of their train show materials; Free-mo posted a video of their layout at the National Train Show. Model Railroader has posted Jim Hediger also talking about the Standards Gauge. Lots of guys and lots of clubs have posted videos of their runs here and there. It strikes me that the two issues for us are, first, how to create video and, second, how to leverage that video.

Creating video is not that hard. It seems like every cell phone can crank out some sort of video. The question is creating good video. One of the things we really could use at the national convention is a clinic or two on using free or inexpensive video editing software to create something we would be proud to up load.

Leveraging it is a much more difficult question. Once you have something nice like Gerry's convention promos, how do you get them out to people?

So where are we? We all know this is the wave of the future. The question is how do we ride it? Basically we have to tell each other what we are doing with technology and how well it is working out.

One of these days soon someone is going to figure out how to use Facebook pages and Tweets to increase people's enjoyment of the hobby. I hope he/she tells us about it.

Bill Kaufman

X2011 West
Social Networking

A Web 2.0 social network strategy would be essential and valuable for convention publicity because of all the following:

For free, we can make our X2011 West information available, visible, and publicized to the model railroaders with internet access worldwide. This worldwide virtual community would see X2011 West:

1. Get strong attention from internet search engines.   Facebook Pages are indexed and considered a strong source of relevant content by internet search engines.
2. Tap into burgeoning internet social networking community.   People can find out about X2011 West in ways we would never dream of. In addition to search engines, by establishing a Facebook Page and updating content regularly, our Facebook fans become sources of sharing our X2011 West content and passing it to others, with their endorsement.
3. Tap into a global digital community.   With Facebook global in nature, we tap into the most connected and active people in the world today.   As Facebook itself continues to grow their worldwide presence, we grow in publicity along with them
4. Tap into ability to literally touch thousands of model railroaders worldwide, most of who will not actually be at the convention...... but will act as positive influencers in their own communities about X2011 West and NMRA.
5. Engage with this worldwide audience and fan base. More traffic, more awareness. Allow those fans and target audiences do some of our marketing for us, by them spreading the word to their friends. Viral marketing - for free
6. Synchronized with other Publicity and X2011 West Convention publicity, communications, activities, functions, attendee interactions
7. Facilitate fan-to-fan interaction.   A *Key* value for this effort
8. Host virtual Promotions and Events as appropriate where it serves our X2011 West objectives
9. Promote other worthy causes. Provide a venue for all of the other interest groups to have an intersection of interests. Act as facilitator for their own social networking
10. I think the fact that we will have a Social Networking strategy will be a fun and necessary addition to our X2011 West convention experience. Viral marketing in action.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viral_marketing

I am actively recruiting X2011 West Social Networking team members, and welcome virtual team members that might be geographically distant (i.e. as in other NMRA Regions as well, as long as that is appropriate).

The ideal team member is *not* a website guru. (although that doesn't hurt).

The ideal candidate is a currently working or retired professional, who has the clear sense that this internet-based Social Networking phenomena is vitally important to understand for business / personal reasons in the years to come, and wants to use working on this X2011 West Social Networking team as a good excuse to learn and gain professional-level

skills in creating, implementing, moderating, and quantifying the business results of a successful internet-based Social Networking strategy.

One of the next things I will immediately do is contact the Facebook NMRA Group admin and have a initial discussion with that person Investigate to see where and who is doing that Facebook Group, and talk to the NMRA web site guy, and find out who thinks what up there and what is planned in the coming year.

You can see below the latest version of the X2011 West Publicity team - Social Networking strategy document.

X2011 West Publicity team - Web 2.0 Social Networking strategy draft version 3 - May 4, 2010

Introduction

For X2011 West convention, a Web 2.0 Social Networking publicity strategy (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, FriendFeed, Digg, Technorati, Delicious, internet chat room and forum , etc) has clear benefits, and would be executed as an integrated, structured part of the overall Publicity, Registration and Convention Experience strategy. There are interaction touch points with many Convention teams where-in we are driving potential attendees to registration, and picking up registrants and offering them participation in the virtual community and Social Networking for X2011 West as soon as they sign up.

In keeping with the theme of X2011 West being the Unconventional Convention, the goals/objectives of the Social Networking

strategy is being drafted to be something like this:

B. Target audiences for this internet-based, mobile-device-capable social networking strategy - suggest segmented into these categories:

Actual convention attendees and prospective convention attendees. Existing registrants, for example, would be one initial target sub-segment for the social networking strategy.

"At-distance" virtual attendees who aren't physically there and may never be there physically, but become interested active virtual fans of the X2011 West convention   (ah ha!)

General worldwide model railroaders

C. For each of these attended categories, our goals might be, in priority sequence:

Provide a strong, current, information-rich, up-to-date, bi-directional information path and **online mobile experience** of X2011 West for all attendees.   Enable attendees to enjoy their experience of convention much more by connecting them with similar-interests and like-minded people.   Provide path for real-time updates of happenings, events, and changes in the Convention.   Focus on enabling the X2011 West convention experience, inclusive if they are physical or virtual attendees.

Provide an online, real-time path for publicity, information, and actionable feedback between the attendees and X2011 West convention management.   Browse-able from handheld mobile devices as well as Internet. Enhance the physical and virtual attendee

experience of the X2011 West NMRA National Convention. (This is an essential integration point with the overall X2011 West convention registration, information flow, press releases, website, and including overall convention event management.)

Enhance all of these attendees' and fan's experience, perception, and enjoyment of X2011 West both *before* and ***especially during the*** event, Regardless of their category or even if they are physically there or not. In this way, expand the X2011 West experience to all.

Provide method for these attendees to *interact with each other* and thus strongly enhance their experience of X2011 West. Enable the attendees to find fellow friends more easily and find fellow attendees with like-minded interests

Create positive perception among all attendees, but especially "at-distance" virtual attendees who aren't physically there. Create worldwide interested active virtual fans of NMRA X2011 West. In this way, influence and create positive recommendations / perceptions of the X2011 West convention to all their friends and the worldwide Internet social networking audience

D. For our own X2011 Publicity and overall Convention team purposes, the additional goals are:

Through providing additional modern online/mobile-device-enabled value to attendees and fans, by garnering worldwide positive recommendations by social networking model railroaders, create new incremental additional attendees that we would not otherwise have had. Perform targeted (and free to us) publicity to the target audience categories, specific to each category. (i.e. general online worldwide model railroad

audience => the worldwide 'at-distance virtual attendees' => prospective attendees => actual registered convention attendees)

Provide method for us as X2011 Publicity and Convention management to interact with all attendee's categories in real-time, listen for valid feedback, and understand what necessary adjustments may be needed. Especially during the actual convention itself.

Provide clean, cohesive process and methodology to interact with the other numerous and rapidly growing internet/real-time Social Networking groups and participants, such as the Joe Fugate Model-Railroad-Hobbyist, bloggers, YouTubers, etc.

Provide a tight interaction with the press and traditional publicity X2011 team - i.e. TV, newspapers, external non-modeler Sacramento / Northern California publicity spokespersons.

E. Examples of effective internet social networking exploitation today, that act as models of what is possible, and also other people/groups/organizations that we clearly need to interact with and publicize to as part of this strategy, include:

Online magazines such as Model RR Hobbyist (Joe Fugate - http://model-railroad-hobbyist.com/). There will be many of these kinds of people and organizations present at X2011, they are literally popping up everywhere on the Internet. We should be and will be actively working with them in prioritized sequence. That will be part of my responsibility as Social Networking leader.

Online Facebook Pages and Groups that exemplify the best of what is possible, good example is BLMA Models. There will be

many social networking sub-Groups formed by others, we should be able to interact and facilitate them.   Examples might be Prototype Modelers, Garden railway, Live steamers, N scalers, O scalers, Narrow Gauge, etc.... i.e. the other interest groups that X2011 West claims we want to be inclusive of.

Inclusive of publicity on the most popular model RR chat rooms and forums, such as Atlas, Trainboard, Railwire, etc.

F. Requirements of the X2011 West team

Thankfully, the **cost is basically free from a capital expenditure standpoint** (that's good).

The **main cost and requirement** is a few ongoing dedicated set of a few volunteers to staff and run this Social Networking initiative.   Their ongoing job, including and especially during the convention, is to create ongoing flow of worthy, up to the minute current, interesting content and then push it out.... to monitor and facilitate the community..... to get a couple X2011 West mobile device apps built, tested, deployed, and supported.

Therefore, upon acceptance of the above outlined strategy as it evolves, the agreed scope of work will be determined by:

The number of reliable volunteers that I and we can recruit, to be focused on this team and this strategy.

In other words, small team = small achievable strategy.

Bigger team = bigger strategy.

G. Initial steps and goals between now and time of the July 2010 Milwaukee NMRA

convention

Discuss strategy, refine, get charter and approval from Convention committee   JS: At Sparks PCR Silver Rails, Jack Burgess said: "go run with it".   So, I started the recruitment of Social Networking team members at Sparks.

Write document of charter.   Define scope of work.

Recruit volunteers for team

Initial Pages for Facebook, up, tested. Initially built and available as a deliverable for Publicity team to display at 75th NMRA Milwaukee convention.

Assure support of the X2011 West team at 75th NMRA Milwaukee. I won't be there, so will need to support remotely.

Continual interaction and feedback with X2011 Convention team

John Sing

Teleconferencing: A Short Primer

By Tom Crawford April 5, 2010

INTRODUCTION

Teleconferencing is an effective technique for having meetings without everyone having to be present. It has the advantage that you can include people in the meeting who could not otherwise be there. It has the disadvantage that the people who are not at the central meeting site often do not hear everything that is said, and also do not see the body language which is so important to good communications.

CONFERENCE CALL CENTERS

There are multiple services available where people call in to a central number using pre-arranged passwords and are connected together in a conference call. Some are free, but most charge a nominal fee, like 10 cents per minute. They can be found on the web by searching for "Conference Call."

When the 2009 PCR convention committee first used this we had a free service because one of our members worked for the local phone company and we used his service.

To use a service like this all you need is a conference phone. These can be quite expensive (several hundred dollars) but well worth it. Don't even think of trying to use a speaker phone. A conference phone is full duplex, and has a speaker on the top and microphones on three or 4 sides, so that all speakers in the room can be heard with no feedback. There is no way a speaker phone can do this.

The biggest issue is cost, even if the service is free. That is because, even if the service is free, people must call into the call center, which most likely will involve long distance calling. A two hour meeting can get quite expensive.

SKYPE

Skype is an internet based service which is free to use and involves no toll or long distance calling. There are actually several similar services, but Skype is the best known and works very well. You can download it free from Skype.com.

The 2011 National Convention committee uses Skype for its meetings since there are multiple people who live too far away to come to the meetings.

Up to five people can participate in a conference call with Skype. If you have more than 4 people calling in to the central location, then Skype won't meet your needs.

As with call centers, you need a good conference phone, except that it is a special phone designed to be used with a computer. To find one, look up "Internet Conference Station" on the internet. Mine has four microphones and connects to the USB port on my laptop.

To use Skype, everyone who will be participating (that is the person at the meeting location and each person Skyping in) needs to get a Skype Name. When you open Skype for the first time, it shows you how to get a Skype Name if you don't have one.

Then you need to add each of the callers to your contact list, and vice versa. To do this, on Skype, there is a "Contacts" menu item on Skype.

Starting a conference call is simple, just choose "Start Conference Call…" under the "Call" menu. Next, select the users you'd like to invite to your conference by selecting their names and clicking "Add to conference". You can select more than one user at a time by using the shift or command key. To begin your conference call, click "Start".

If you are already in an active call and would like to add an additional participant to a conference, you can select the person you want to add to the conference from your contact list, control-click or click the drop down menu button and choose "Add to conference".

PCR Yahoo Group
A Short History

Bill Kaufman

I started the Pacific Coast Region Yahoo Group pretty much on a whim in February of 2002. I really had no idea of what it was useful for. I had been a member of the old CompuServe Model Railroad board and this looked like a quick and easy way to run something like it. I think Ray de Blieck was the President of PCR. Anyway I asked him if he thought it was a good thing. He thought it might but was concerned about its connection to the official organization so the home page of the group says to this day, "The group is not, however, sponsored by or even affiliated with the PCR or the NMRA. Those bodies are not responsible for anything posted here." So far we've stayed out of trouble.

In those days it was quite simple to set up the group. It is even easier now. Once you are on Yahoo, you click a button that says "Start a Group". That leads you to a page that asks you to "Select a Yahoo! Groups Category". I would choose "Hobbies & Crafts" today. Clicking on that takes you to a set of sub categories and "Models" seems appropriate. And on to "trains and railroads" where I clicked on a button labeled "place my group here."

This then takes you to a page to describe the group. You give it a name, a sort of general email address and have about 2000 characters to describe the group. Next it wants your contact info.

That's it. It has been created. Now the question is customizing it. There is a whole sequence of questions about who gets to join and what they can access. You have to figure out what you want. Your needs may be different. I have the PCR board set up so that anybody can join and, once they have joined, they can see anything. I have two major restrictions. One is that new members messages are moderated (that means I have to OK them before they get posted). I leave them on moderated status until they say something sensible and I know they are legit but then I remove the moderation. The other is that the messages do not permit attachments. It's a security thing. If you have a file you want us to see, put it in the files section and tell us about it. Keeps unwanted glop out of people's mailboxes.

Now comes the hard part. You need to roust out some people to join. Yahoo has a nice little scheme that invites people. It even provides buttons that you can cut and paste into website to direct people to your site, so that is not the hard part. The hard part is providing content, stirring the pot when things get quiet. Providing interest and

conversation. Making it worthwhile to the participants.

The PCR board has been up and running for eight years and needs very little stirring. At this point, the PCR would be a very different animal without the board. Over the course of the years it has publicized and help organize divisional meets, regional conventions, the BayRails operations weekend and the LD/OPSIG annual meeting. It has helped find members to staff membership booths at train shows. It has hosted a number of descriptions of railfan road trips. People have posted DCC questions, scratch-building questions, requests for rides to and from places, obituaries, rants about what is wrong with the NMRA/PCR/their division/life in general/ foamers/model railroaders, and complements to the NMRA/PCR/their division/foamers/model railroaders. The President posts what he gets from National on the board.

There are about 250 members of the board. Now some of them are not members of the PCR (we don't insist on it) but it is a pretty good percentage of the about 1100 NMRA members living in the region.

Seems like a success to me. Some divisions now have their own and various planning committees have used Yahoo to organize all sorts of meetings and conventions.