



NATIONAL MODEL RAILROAD ASSOCIATION

The NMRA advances the worldwide scale model railroading community through education and standards as well as advocacy and fellowship.

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Stories of success and failure



President's Car

NMRA President Mike Brestel

As you know, November is Model Railroad Month in the U.S. All over the

country, and possibly the world, volunteers are engaging in activities designed to focus the public's attention upon our favorite hobby and on the NMRA. We usually see some new members as a result of all these activities. Then it is important to show our new friends how glad we are to have them aboard and what we're all about.

In my August 2009 column, I wrote about the importance of delivering value to our members at the grass-roots level. At the end of the column, I asked for responses from divisions and regions illustrating the real world ways in which they deliver value to the membership. I also asked for constructive criticism of our current efforts.

This month's *SCALE RAILS* has two responses to my August request. The first one I want to bring to your attention is a four-page article about the growth and success of Cincinnati Division 7 of the Mid Central Region, authored by Charlie Atkinson, MMR, one of the architects of a 43-year run of growth and service to the hobby and the NMRA. That article appears elsewhere in this issue.

The second response is a very different kind of story. In a series of e-mails, a new member tells what happens when we fail to bring him/her into our fellowship. Something like this can happen anywhere in the NMRA at any time if we're not paying attention.

I have changed or deleted the names of the persons and the region involved, because it's more important that we all learn from this incident than finding someone to blame.

August 5, 2009

Dear Mike,

I have just finished reading my first issue of SCALE RAILS (August 2009) as a new member of the NMRA. I have been a model railway (sorry, railroad — I hail from England originally) enthusiast since I was seven years old when I received my first Hornby Dublo train set. Some 55 years later, I am still modeling in OO/HO scale, both British and U.S. prototypes.

The reason I am writing to you is I totally agree with some of your comments in the "President's Car" regarding membership and in particular new members. I joined the NMRA on June 11, 2009. Sadly, to date no one has contacted me, and I know nothing of what is going on in my Region.

This may be partly my fault. When I filled in the application on line, I originally aligned myself with the ABC Region, not realizing I would be better placed in the XYZ Region, as I live in [location deleted]. It was unclear what territory XYZ Region covered. I called Daphne in your Headquarters office within a day or so and she agreed to change my application to XYZ Region. I had included the extra dues for the Region with my application.

I consider myself an experienced modeler, but my main reason for becoming a member of the NMRA was to find out more about DCC, to which I am currently converting my layout. Also I wanted to find out more about U.S. railroads from a prototypical perspective. Having grown up in England, I am totally familiar with British prototypical practice, but have very limited knowledge about U.S. railroads.

Again, I agree with your comments. Maintaining membership in any primarily volunteer organization is always a challenge.

Best regards,

Joe Smith

(text continues on page 6)

Membership: NMRA membership dues are \$58 (U.S. currency) per year, of which \$19 covers subscription to the official publication, *SCALE RAILS* and *NMRA BULLETIN*[®]. Address all membership applications, renewals, notices of non-receipt (issues that have been lost or delayed in the mail), or other business matters to the headquarters office. Back issues of *SCALE RAILS* are available while supplies last from the Kalmbach Memorial Library at Chattanooga — contact the library regarding availability and pricing.

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August 5, 2009

Joe –

Thanks for your note. I'm not sure how the XYZ Region contacts new members, so I'm sending your note on to the region president, [name deleted], and to Bob Gangwish, the national secretary. I'm sure that one or both of these gentlemen will be in touch with you, or will make sure that the appropriate procedure is followed in contacting you.

It was thoughtful of you to correct your new member form, but actually HQ would have figured it out, since the computer uses zip codes to sort members into the correct region and division.

If you don't hear something by the end of August, by all means let me know and I'll see what I can find out from this end.

Thanks again,
Mike

September 9, 2009

Dear Mike,

You may remember me writing to you back at the beginning of August about not being contacted as a new member. See below. I was contacted by Bob Gangwish following your note to him; thank you.

I wrote to Bob again yesterday telling him I still had not heard from anyone else in the XYZ Region and I was not being allowed to log in to the XYZ Region website. I was getting a message that the XYZ Region did not have my information when I entered my membership number.

This has been confirmed by the Region webmaster, who stated, "The issue here is when we receive your data. It is in the August data set we received from the NMRA. Normally, this data is received before the end of the month and the import process must run prior to the end of the month. August data wasn't received until September 3, so I can't import it."

You may remember, I wrote to you originally agreeing with you about your President's Car column on membership and in particular new members. In my case, you didn't know how correct you were. Obviously, it is taking an inordinate amount of time to get from application stage at headquarters to informing the regions and finally being accepted as a member of region. If I understand the XYZ webmaster correctly, I will be acknowledged sometime around the end of September. I have attached my online membership confirmation

dated June 11, 2009. I would have thought I would have been part of June's data set, not August?

I have been a member of the NMRA for more than three months and the only benefit I have had is two copies of SCALE RAILS. Thought you might want to know what happens to a real new member.

Best regards,
Joe

September 9, 2009

Jenny [Office Manager Jenny Hendricks]—can you find out when this member's application was received, when it was processed, and when the data was sent to the XYZ Region hierarchy?

Joe Smith
Membership #xxxxx
Thanks,
Mike

September 15, 2009

Mike,

Mr. Smith sent his new member application on Thursday, June 11, 2009, via the online store. We keyed his info on Monday, June 15, 2009, and mailed his new member pack in the bulk mailing of June 25, 2009.

His new membership was reported to the Region in the end-of-month report assembled and sent to the Region on June 25, 2009. He is a member from August 1, 2009, until July 31, 2010. His first SCALE RAILS would have been the August issue, which was dropped in the mail in mid-July.

I have checked his address and all the other information, and everything is correct.

Jenny

So what happened here is that a new member joined the NMRA in June and his information was transmitted to the region two weeks later, along with all end-of-month membership changes. Three months later, the information still had not been acted upon. A golden opportunity to bring an enthusiastic new member into the life of his region and division has been lost.

I alerted the Region president to the situation as soon as I got that first plea for help from "Joe," but I never heard back from him. Bob Gangwish tells me that he has been in contact with others in the region and division concerned, but he has not been able to discover exactly what happened or why our volunteers fell down on the job so badly.

As I said earlier, I have no interest in assigning blame in this incident. At this time, I have no idea what went wrong here, or what can be done specifically to fix it. But we all know that this is just not good enough. We can do better. We must do better if we are going to survive, much less accomplish our goals as an organization.

We can do a great job in 16 regions out of 17, we can be on the ball 11 months out of 12, but when a member is ignored by his region or division, we have failed. As far as that member is concerned, we are batting .000.

Yes, we're all volunteers, we all have bad days, we're getting older, we're overworked, blah, blah, blah. We've heard the excuses. What we must do is build a system for member service that takes into account the vagaries of volunteer effort, so that when we have a bad day, it's the system that carries us through.

The article about Cincinnati Division 7's success shows us that a system and a standard for volunteer service can be sustained for over 40 years. In the coming months, SCALE RAILS will be featuring other examples of the NMRA in Action, showing how NMRA volunteers groups have organized themselves for responsiveness and growth.

In addition, Bill Kaufman of the Regions and Divisions chat list is putting together a best practices manual, in which successful local organizations will share blueprints on how to organize for success. If you are interested in contributing to this grass-roots effort with success stories of your own, please contact Bill at whk58@pacbell.net.

No matter how big we are or might become, the NMRA's opportunities for success and failure rest squarely on the shoulders of each of our many volunteers, every day, in every new encounter or situation. If we failed yesterday, we can still succeed today.

Let's work together to build an organization that has clear goals of service and that teaches strategies for reaching those goals. Let's find – and share – ways that we can deliver value at every level, every day.

