

## CORPORATE MEMBERSHIP OF THE FRIENDS OF LONDON TRANSPORT MUSEUM

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In 1989 I was asked to join the Management Committee of the Friends of London Transport Museum to breathe new life into what was a somewhat moribund corporate membership scheme. At its best it had drawn in only about five members and the scheme was, by 1989, just drifting along with the one or two remaining members who had somehow forgotten to cancel their £50 annual subscription standing orders!

The question now is how to proceed with the story about corporate membership at London Transport Museum in such a way that it will be interesting, and, hopefully, informative to the 'museum visitor on the Clapham Omnibus'.

All museum Friends will no doubt be aware of the continual struggle to try to make ends meet in such a way that the day to day running expenses of the museum can be covered, and that there is some money left available for acquisitions and restoration work.

The story of the resurrection of the Corporate Membership Scheme at the museum tells how a little bit of inspiration, and lots of perspiration, produced a worthwhile financial outcome. Since the scheme was launched in January 1991 a sum of approaching £250,000 has been raised from corporate membership fees and a number of other corporate membership inspired fund raising activities.

### London Transport Museum

The museum is located in the heart of Covent Garden, London. The great cast-iron framed hall, which houses the museum dates from 1870. The Duke of Bedford to extend the facilities of London's Covent Garden vegetable markets to include a central flower market built it. When the markets moved out to the site of the former Nine Elms locomotive depot in 1975, a new use was sought for the building and the idea of bringing London's transport inheritance to a new home in the heart of the metropolis was conceived.

After conversion of the building, the museum opened for the first time on its new site in 1980. In 1993 the museum was completely refurbished under a £4 million investment programme which has increased display space with spectacular new mezzanine floors, linked by a curved bridge across the bus and tram sections.

Environmental conditions have been improved for the good of the collections and the comfort of visitors. At the same time the museum's displays have been totally renewed and now include nearly 100 interactive or audio visual elements including simulators, operating models and monitors, giving access to film, photos and written information on the vehicles on display. The museum also houses London Transport's extensive collection of vehicles, posters and other historic items, recalling the development of public transport in London over the years.

Public education underlies all of the museum's activities. It is of the essence of the new displays that they are educational as well as entertaining. The museum aims to look at how the evolution in the technology of transport, and improvements in vehicles themselves, have contributed to changes in London's way of life and in the shape of the city in which its citizens and visitors live, work or relax.

### Getting Started

One particular need had been in the mind of the Friends' Management Committee for some time. This was a wish to completely refurbish a horse tram, which had been discovered some twenty years ago in a farmer's field in Kent - being used as a shed!

The refurbishment project was going to be an expensive one and the Friends had no clear idea how the money was likely to be raised. However, it was then decided that the Corporate Membership Scheme should be resuscitated, and it was hoped that this would provide the focus for the revived scheme.

In such fund raising efforts as these, it does seem to be most useful if all concerned can have a target to aim at and it was the Friends' desire to see the Stephenson Horse Tram fully restored and put on public display in the museum.

### **Marketing The Scheme**

This was approached in a number of ways. First of all it was felt important to be able to offer to potential Corporate Friends a choice of category, and thereby a variety of fee scales. It was decided to market the scheme categories under the labels 'Gold' and 'Silver' and to attach to the categories fee rates of £2,500 and £1,000 per annum respectively.

The Friends agonised for some time over the level of these rates, and a number of people felt that we should not over reach ourselves and expect Corporate Members to pay what seemed, at that time, very high rates. However, it was decided to produce a package of really tangible benefits, which could be offered to Corporate Members, all of which would be available to them in the splendid location at Covent Garden.

The fact that the scheme has attracted a reasonable number of members seems to suggest that fortune does, indeed, favour the bold. In setting fee scales it is also sensible to have a look round the market place and discover what other museums and galleries are charging for similar schemes. This was done and the scheme was placed towards the top end of the market range but also recognising that London Transport Museum was not in the same league as some of the major London museums.

It was evident that the best recruitment strategy would be to target London based firms, together with those who had an association with London Transport. A list of potential corporate members was compiled in this way. However, whilst the list was fairly readily put together, the difficult part was to try to discover the most appropriate person to whom the corporate membership invitation should be made.

It is crucial to the success of the approach that the 'right' person is identified. Ideally, the best individual is one who holds a sufficiently senior post such that he, or she, has a decision making authority, is generally in sympathy with the aims of the museum and, hopefully, is something of a public transport buff. Sadly, there are not too many of these people around, but it is worth a lot of effort rummaging around looking for people who most nearly fit with such a profile.

A marketing budget was then drawn up, and duly authorised. In those days, the Friends' financial resources were slender and the start-up budget totalled some £5,000. This was about two thirds of the reserve fund, but, thankfully the Treasurer was thoroughly committed to the project and a decision to go ahead was taken, with just a little trepidation.

### **The Recruitment Process**

The next step was to set about recruiting members. First of all the production of a corporate membership marketing brochure was commissioned. The chosen tactic was to hold a series of recruitment receptions at the museum, using the brochure as part of the invitation to attend. This seemed to be a straightforward and honest approach, as those attending the reception knew why they were being invited.

Whilst the marketing brochure has also been used for mailing out to potential members, the reception technique has produced the best recruitment results. It has been found that most people who come to the museum are impressed with it as a venue and the collections strike a sympathetic chord with many guests. Lurking inside many a sober business suit is an enthusiastic bus or train spotter!

Another useful recruitment procedure was to enlist the help of people in public transport management positions who are in touch with the commercial world, and it is worth spending some time, and perhaps also extending a little hospitality, to get these kind of folk firmly on your side so that they can help with the recruitment process through their day to day business contacts.

A stand was also taken at a railway industry trade exhibition with the objective of trying to attract corporate membership from the other exhibitors rather than from those people who were attending the exhibition. It has to be said that this turned out to be hard work and only produced sufficient additional membership to just about clear expenses. Nevertheless, it was felt that it had been a useful initiative as it publicised the museum's refurbishment and redisplay plans at a time when the museum was closed for an extended period whilst this work was being carried out.

There is considerable merit in being persistent in pressing home the corporate membership invitation. The recruitment of quite a number of members was achieved only after beavering away steadily until they were finally persuaded to join. Perseverance pays off!

## **The Results**

Membership built up fairly quickly, and by the end of the first year 21 members had been signed up. Recruitment is regarded as a continuing activity and the membership roll has now risen to a total of some 40 companies, of which four are honorary. This produces a gross annual fee income of around £70,000.

Happily, the drop out rate has not been significant in that in any one year since the scheme was launched new recruits have more than made up for those members who decided to withdraw.

This performance is one, which we are pleased with as our launch and build-up period spanned one of the deepest economic recessions, which this country has suffered for many years. The honorary memberships are awarded to companies, who provide substantial sponsorship help to the museum equivalent to, at least, the annual Silver Membership fee. Interestingly, it has been found that it is not too difficult to convert an honorary member to a fee-paying one once their period of honorary membership has come to an end.

## **Having Got 'em, How To Keep 'em**

So far, the membership retention record has been good. It is believed that the prime reason for this is that considerable effort has been expended by both the Friends and the museum staff to make Corporate Members feel part of the museum community.

In the early days of the re-launched scheme, the Friends decided to recruit their first, and Membership Co-ordinator whose prime task has been to administer the scheme and act as a communications link between the Corporate Friends and the museum. By this means, the Corporate Members are kept abreast of museum events by chatty letters and a regular flow of invitations to activities such as private views, special exhibitions and other activities. They are made to feel that the Co-ordinator is there to help them by answering their questions and resolving any queries and, above all, getting things done!

No public event of any significance happens in the museum without the Corporate Members having been invited to join in.

## **Working With The Museum**

As the Friends' fund raising capability has increased, care has been taken not to get at cross purposes with the museum staff over sponsorship and general fund raising issues and a 'horses for courses' approach has been adopted - if the Friends can best promote a particular fund raising cause, then the museum does not make an input and, conversely, if the museum can best take the lead, then the Friends are happy to lend whatever support they can to their efforts.

This isn't to say that everything is 'sweetness and light' but good communication and healthy discussion have resolved the issues which have arisen to date.

In fact, the museum has been happy for the Friends to take the lead in promoting a number of significant sponsorship and fund raising initiatives. This has lessened the burden on scarce museum staff resources and produced a worthwhile financial return.

## **What Now?**

The Corporate Membership Scheme will continue in the newly refurbished museum and, in recognition of the improved facilities which are now available, the Corporate Membership fees have been modestly increased, with the Gold Plus Membership now standing at £5,000 per annum, the Gold Membership at £3,000 per annum and the Silver Scheme at £1,250 per annum.

A new, superior, grade of membership has also been introduced - the Diamond category - in celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of the founding of London Transport. The fee for this premium grade of membership, which offers a substantially increased range of benefits, is £10,000 per annum.

The Corporate Membership of the Friends of London Transport Museum seems to have settled in well at Covent Garden so it is intended to work to the maxim "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!"