

It's time to go mobile

Can we get young people into model railroading? Manufacturers will never know if they don't market to them by phone.

BY JOHN CUBBIN

I recently came across a familiar theme on a model railroad forum: how to get younger people into model railroading.

No specific ages were mentioned, but for expediency I assumed "younger" meant under 20—kids. The consensus was that kids have too many electronic options to choose from and model trains really can't compete. Why would they want to lay track or create scenery when they could be texting or posting selfies on social media?

I do understand this fairly typical view. We think kids view model trains as old-fashioned. We assume they can be fickle (unlike adults, of course) and that the newest iPhone or Android takes precedence. Any of this could explain the declining number of younger model railroaders.

On the other hand, are model railroad manufacturers really reaching out and trying to understand and connect with a younger audience in meaningful ways?

Mobile-centric audiences are the new majority of searchers, browsers and shoppers online. Why, then, isn't every model train manufacturer's website mobile-friendly *right now*? Younger people prefer mobile, but we stick to a non-mobile format. Maybe mobile is overrated, but the world's biggest search engine doesn't think so. In a 2015 release from Google:

"Starting April 21 (2015), we will be expanding our use of mobile-

friendliness as a ranking signal. This change will affect mobile searches in all languages worldwide and will have a significant impact in our search results."

This "Mobilegeddon," dire or not, should tell us that things are changing and changing fast. Overlooking mobile is a shortcoming in marketing to younger people.

So, get mobile-friendly. Check.

What else? How about social media? To many of us, Facebook and Twitter are for product announcements—and to us, that's social media. Yes, those are popular outlets. But, again, things change fast. It's important to know where younger people are going and why.

"Facebook is getting less and less cool, at least among teens," says Frank N. Magid Associates Inc. on Bloomberg.com. And Mark May, an analyst at Citigroup, recently wrote, "Not only is Instagram's audience now larger than Twitter, but its users are about 1.8 times more engaged, and user growth has been greater."

Having someone in your company in charge of social media should mean more than just posting new product releases on Twitter. Social media, whether we currently

embrace it or not, is here to stay, and it can be very influential with younger people.

But to be effective, it has to be done well. It has to be understood.

Another media outlet that many don't immediately think of as

"social" media is YouTube. (A quick aside: YouTube is the world's second-most popular search engine.) The potential for making connections, establishing a customer network and direct customer interaction is all there. Of course, you just can't shoot a video and expect it to translate to sales right away. Too many companies look at YouTube as a free TV channel, ready to accept their in-house commercials. I see many manufacturers post the occasional YouTube video and leave it there—no follow-up videos or interaction. Sadly, this isn't uncommon.

Over the past several months, I've watched several YouTube videos from U.K. railway modelers. The number of views these videos receive is much greater than videos posted by U.S. modelers.

Digging farther into U.K. modeling, I compared the Twitter accounts of the U.K. National Railway Museum (<http://www.nrm.org.uk>) with the U.S. National Railroad Museum (<http://www.nationalrailmuseum.org>). The U.K. museum's Twitter account has 22,000 followers, while the U.S. museum's Twitter account has just 120 followers. That's a jarring difference. What do they know in the U.K. about social media that we are missing?

I've just scratched the surface, but I do think the heavy lifting in getting younger people involved in model railroading has to be done by manufacturers. I also think these manufacturers should look beyond the old-school methods of advertising and marketing and dedicate resources to new media, especially social media.

Most of all, though, if we want model railroading to appeal to younger people, we need to lose the mind-set that pits us against all those wonderful iPhone and Android devices.

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