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## 2012 Marketing Communications Plan New Hope Valley Railway and North Carolina Railroad Museum

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January 21, 2012

### Situation Analysis

The New Hope Valley Railroad and North Carolina Railroad Museum (NHVR/NCRM) in Bonsal, North Carolina, operate diesel locomotives and the Carolina's only steam engine. The train travels through eight miles of scenic woods and over a trestle. The original NHVR route dates back to more than 100 years ago and was where Jordan Lake now exists.

All of the organization's operations, maintenance and administration are conducted by volunteers. The volunteers who run this organization make up only 16 percent of the New Hope Valley Railroad's membership. Despite the low number of volunteers, the organization has made some huge improvements to the NHVR/NCRM site in recent years including the addition of new train cars; construction of a new ticket house, steam work platform, unloading platforms and picnic tables; and purchase of a scissors lift and climate-controlled storage containers.

The small volunteer base is very organized and dedicated to the history and preservation of the railroad, equipment and museum collections. With such a heavy workload and an aging core group of volunteers, the organization recognizes the need to grow its membership, which will allow for expansion of the volunteer base and an increase in ridership and overall activity at NHVR/NCRM.

The NHVR/NCRM Board of Directors did a SWOT analysis. A few additional SWOT bullet points were added by Communicopia, as an objective outside source, and are as follows:

### Additional Strengths:

- Well-written monthly newsletter
- Website in place and functional with online ticket sales
- Active and engaged board of directors and committees

### Weaknesses:

- Too many names for one entity and not memorable to most people--NHVR/NCRM.
- Name doesn't indicate place or where the train is located. New Hope Valley and Bonsal are unknown and seem far away to most Triangle residents.
- Confusion with NC Transportation Museum and New Hope Valley train in Pennsylvania
- Membership benefits not clearly outlined, communicated or promoted
- Newsletter can be perceived as "old-fashioned" because not in full color or electronic, and can lead to the assumption that membership is for seniors or retired train enthusiasts.
- Website content not clear, navigation a bit clunky needs more details in some areas, easier way to update (Word Press).
- Onsite porta-johns not conducive to families, moms who need to accompany children.

### Opportunities

- Become more family friendly with targeted activities and amenities
- Implement marketing strategies and tactics to streamline messages and garner greater attention from the general public.
- Electronic newsletter with color photos & links. More stories about NHVR—readers can find other news online or thru RSS feeds. Save postage and only mail to those who request hardcopies.
- Buy nicer, trailer-type restrooms that don't require sewer lines, but are spacious, comfortable.

### Threats

- Unwillingness to adopt new technology to reach target audience – electronic newsletters, social media, easier website content management.

This plan provides clear objectives, strategies and tactics provided to increase NHVR/NCRM's target audience of potential members, add value to membership and grow the number of people who board the trains and visit the museum in Bonsal each year.

### **Overall Marketing Objectives**

The marketing objectives for NHVR/NCRM are two tier. Build awareness of the NHVR/NCRM to:

- Grow membership
- Increase ridership and overall business

### **Target Audience**

Train enthusiasts from the Silent and Babyboomer generations who live within a 50-mile radius of Bonsal, NC. This group loves trains and wants to be a part of servicing, maintaining and operating the trains at the NHVR/NCRM. Many are:

- Retired
- Members of civic organizations like Rotary, Kiwanis, Masons or Civitans
- Members of model railroad clubs
- Train show attendees
- Worked for the railroad in some capacity

Key messaging for train enthusiast is to keep romance and history of the railroad alive.

- Become a member and receive an opportunity to service, maintain and operate real trains
- Take advantage of this outlet for sharing your train knowledge by educating NHVR/NCRM visitors with this living history experience.

### **Secondary Audience**

Multi-generational families who live within a 50-mile radius of Bonsal, NC. This group of children, parents and grandparents are looking for fun, wholesome activities they can participate in as a family. Interests may include:

- Model trains
- Stories about trains like *Thomas the Train* or the *Boxcar Children* series
- Large themed birthday parties for children
- Financially supporting non-profit organizations
- Volunteering in other organizations
- Membership to children's museums and mom's groups

Key messaging for families:

- Bring the whole family to spend a fun-filled day seeing, touching and riding a real train and old-time train memorabilia while learning about railroad history.
- Become a member to support the Triangle's only operating steam engine. Keep train history alive through the museum and the train experience viable and available to Triangle families for generations to come.

## **Year One Marketing Objectives: 2012**

Increase awareness of the NHVR/NRCM to grow membership, resulting in a larger volunteer base.

### **Strategies**

- Brand NHVR/NRCM and the museum as one memorable entity.
- Prepare for a higher level of activity at the NHVR/NRCM.

### **Tactics**

1. Update logo and create new tagline that is memorable and identifiable.
2. Website
  - Change website name to a more memorable and easy URL, based on new tagline.
  - Update look and feel of site to engage families. Make site easier to navigate.
  - Post clear descriptions and photos of all special events on the website, beginning with details about the NC Science Festival.
  - Add an interactive volunteer sign-up document to the website.
  - Include capability to pay for membership fees and annual dues online.
  - Add a blog to site where members and others can share their stories (much like Steve DeGaetano's article in the May newsletter).
  - Remove broken links.
3. Focus on the family/kids-oriented event NC Science Festival, Sunday, April 22 to kick-off the season by offering free activities and promoting the 2012 train schedule.
  - Along with the branding effort, create a memorable, kid-friendly icon/mascot in which your target audience, young and old can relate. In honor of the train's first logo and the Lightnin' Bug Route, use a lightnin' bug as your icon/mascot. Introduce him during the NC Science Festival. Some activities can include:
    - Create/make a Lightnin' Bug mascot costume and have a volunteer wear it during the NC Science Festival and other special events.
    - During the NC Science Festival, conduct lightnin' bug and other related science experiments, crafts and games. Give-away a coloring page of the Lightnin' Bug and on the back have the 2012 Scheduled Ride Days listed and website URL.
    - Promote a contest for kids to come up with a name for the Lightnin' Bug. Kids can enter their name choice during the NC Science Festival. Determine prizes for the winner (ride in the steam engine, 1-year membership for his/her family)
    - Create a kid's membership category, called Lightnin' Bugs. Special introductory membership fee during NC Science Festival.
    - Write and distribute news release and heavy promotion with local media for the NC Science Festival--the kick-off of the new season and new Lightnin' Bug mascot, name contest and free kids' games and activities on April 22.
4. Rack card
  - Create a new rack card (1-panel front & back, full color, on cover stock paper) with basic details and website for more info. Distribute to local hobby shops (Tom's Train Station), children's museums (ex./ Marbles, Museum of Life & Science) Chambers of Commerce, RDU Airport, KOAs, Visitor Centers at rest stops, etc.
  - Also use as a leave behind at speaking engagements and a take-away at your ticket booth.

## 5. Social Media

- Create a Facebook page with current photos and regular posts about what's happening aimed at visitors and families. Consider starting a Group Page Facebook page for members.
- Create a YouTube channel and add regular videos of themed events, birthday parties, field trips and Operate-a-LoCo days.
- Create a Meet-Up group for train enthusiasts.

## 6. Membership

-Develop membership levels with clear benefits and requirements for each. Clarify current benefits and add new ones, such as:

- o 10 percent discount for items purchased in gift shop
- o Partner with other trains for reduced price on train rides or museum admission
- o Member ride day
- o Lunch & fellowship provided for volunteers during certain days
- o Enhance annual membership dinner so that it appeals to all members; create a clear vision for this event; add value by bringing in entertainment, speakers, activities for children or holding a silent auction and/or model train contest.

-Include a children's membership (the Lightnin' Bug membership).

-Update website to allow individuals to join and pay for membership and annual dues online.

-Create a membership area at the ticket house or close to the exit to capture families who are caught up in the days energy and fun and therefore willing to join on the spot.

## 7. Volunteers

-Develop a detailed list of volunteer roles and responsibilities required for each.

-Target volunteer recruitment messaging to specific audience segment. Present volunteer roles to train enthusiasts as an opportunity to get their hands on the workings of a train; offer parents of young families options that do not require training or committing to a monthly trip to Bonsal; identify responsibilities the Lightnin' Bug members can fulfill. For instance, the Y Guide/Y Princess programs do service projects. The older, third-year girls and their dads could do grounds clean-up/beautification projects. [www.arapahoe-nation.org](http://www.arapahoe-nation.org)

-Create an interactive volunteer sign-up calendar that is accessible via the Website.

## **Year Two Marketing Objectives: 2013**

Create awareness to increase ridership and overall business.

### **Strategies**

- Execute a robust advertising and public relations campaign surrounding the 30th anniversary.
- Add more train rides.
- Implement more themed events.

### **Tactics**

#### 8. Public Relations

-Create and define the media list to include print and broadcast media

-Develop key messages and talking points

### Tactics (continued)

-Send news releases to targeted media outlets to announce the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and annual events.

-Schedule a media day; invite members of the media, kids' publications and websites, bloggers, and their families to Bonsal to see the trains and find out what is happening firsthand.

-Pitch feature articles to publications like *Carolina Parent*, *Baby and Child* and *Our State*.

-Identify and develop relationships with featured bloggers on sites like TriangleMom2Mom and train hobby bloggers.

#### 9. Advertise

-Create a new ad campaign tailored for various publications and develop an advertising plan to effectively reach target audiences. In addition to local media, consider placement in magazines like *Trains*, *Trains4Kids*, *Model Railroader*, *Classic Trains* and *Railfan & Railroad*.

#### 10. Signage

-Create signage, consistent with the new brand, for each area of the grounds including the train cars, museum, ticket house, garden railroad, etc. This will give the grounds a cleaner, unified look.

#### 11. Speaking engagements

-Contact Triangle area civic organizations (Kiwanis, District 7710 Rotary Clubs (45 in the Triangle) and Exchange Clubs) and other groups to secure speaking engagements on railroad history and the NHVR/NCRM; promote membership and volunteer opportunities.

- Develop PowerPoint presentation and script to use with these groups.

#### 12. Storytellers

-Add a story time to ride days; find or hire a storyteller to tell stories surrounding trains.

#### 13. Lunch & Learn

Educate members on railroad history and specific equipment with quarterly lunch and learns (these are different than trainings on equipment operation and maintenance trainings); have a railroad history buff give a lecture (take advantage of opportunity to ask attendees to become docents at end).

#### 14. New annual events

-Develop new annual themed events. A few ideas include:

*Celebrate Mom/Dad:* have a photographer on site to take photos of kids with mom or dad on the train in honor of Mother's Day and Father's Day.

*Proud to be an American:* In July, decorate the train and grounds for Independence Day; hold a patriotic costume contest; set up a flag tag relay (blue and red buckets of sand with small flags sticking out – run a relay to get them all), run a late train ride and set off firecrackers after dark.

*Arts Festival:* bring in local artisans for a bazaar to sell their works.

*Fall Ag Festival:* In September, have pumpkin carving or painting; decorate the grounds, ticket booth and museum for fall. Focus on agriculture in the area, etc.