

General Public Relations: the Louisville & Nashville's Civil War Centennial Efforts

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Extended Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show how a revered artifact of American history was used in direct public relations efforts by the Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L&N) at a time of declining revenues (Morgan, 1963) and general industry distress. It draws heavily upon corporate archives along with a personal interview of a retired L&N public relations executive from that era. It demonstrates how well-planned strategic application of corporate history can even today provide direct benefits to a firm in its relationships with stakeholders.

Introduction

From the late 19th century to well through the 20th, a singular steam locomotive, the *General*, held an iconic place in U. S. Civil War history following what came to be known as The Great Locomotive Chase of April 12, 1862. For decades, Union advocates thrilled to the cool nerves of William J. Andrews and his "Andrews Raiders," a group of soldier/spies who took the locomotive and its train on a wild run across the Georgia countryside. They were attempting to cut Confederate transportation and communication links between Atlanta and Chattanooga, Tennessee. And Southerners delighted in the feats of train conductor William Fuller, who, left behind in Big Shanty, chased his stolen train literally on foot, until, commandeering rail vehicles along the way, he caught up with the *General* near Ringgold, Georgia. Following capture of Andrews Raiders, the *General* returned to service on L&N predecessor Western & Atlantic (W&A). It appeared with Conductor Fuller and ten of the eleven surviving Raiders at an 1888 reunion of the Grand Army of the Republic and upon retirement was nearly scrapped save for the efforts of a photographer and exhibitor in 1890 who convinced the railroad (now under lease to the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis [NC&St.L]) to preserve it. It then went on display at Chattanooga Union Station, being taken out from time to time for display at various major fairs around the country and being the subject of two motion pictures, Buster Keaton's "The *General*" of 1926 and Disney's "The Great Locomotive Chase of 1955" (Morgan, 1962; Bonds, 2007).

Centennial

About 1960, Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver suggested to NC&St.L successor L&N that the *General* be restored to operating condition for observance of the Civil War Centennial. As a result, L&N Director of Public Relations W. A. McNeill recommended to railroad President William Kendall that the *General*'s restoration be unveiled at the 100th anniversary of Andrews Raid and that the locomotive continue to be used for promotion of the L&N (McNeill, 1961).

Strategy

Early in 1961 McNeill submitted to Kendall a lengthy memo outlining the strategy of the restoration: "We have in the *General* a unique and invaluable public relations tool which is widely envied by other railroads. Its effectiveness as a magnet for attention will be at a peak during the Centennial observance period. Not to use it would seem grossly wasteful." McNeill emphasized that the *General* would not be engaged in direct selling but would have "institutional promotion value" to provide a favorable impression of the L&N. The memo outlined detailed plans for the centennial observance of the locomotive chase to be held April 14, 1962, at Big Shanty, since renamed Kennesaw. Then the locomotive would become a traveling ambassador for the railroad including visits to major cities that especially coincided with Civil War centennial observances. McNeill recommended a budget of \$20,000 for 1961 and \$50,000 for 1962 and noted that "the L&N has not been keeping pace with our competitors in expenditures for institutional advertising" (McNeill, 1961).

Focus

Despite the historical value of the *General*, and its relationship to events of the Civil War and the centennial, the L&N used it as a tool to demonstrate the features of a modern railroad. Times were difficult for the industry, which came out of World War II anticipating that the wartime traffic boom would continue. Instead, improved roads, including launching of the interstate highway system and jet technology resulted in freight and passengers abandoning trains for trucks, cars and planes. Joining these challenges were the burdens of heavy regulation and government-mandated money-losing passenger trains. As a result, a passenger car the *General* pulled was outfitted as a traveling display. At the *General's* whistle stops, people filed through the car to learn of the contemporary railroad story, especially that of L&N (Castner, 2015). L&N President Kendall said “building interest in the *General* is to be regarded, not as an end in itself, but as a means of gaining an audience for the story of L&N progress” (Priswold, circa 1963). In his memo to Kendall, McNeill said promotion efforts would not be limited to history: “No one who came to see this historical treasure should be allowed to go away without a reminder that the Dixie Line today is more important to the nation than the W&A was in 1862” (McNeill, 1961).

Operations

The *General* project left nothing to chance. A detailed public relations-oriented operations manual provided specific instructions regarding event planning, publicity, ticketing, lighting, security, sponsoring groups, relationships with local dignitaries, bands, etc. with special attention given to L&N shippers (customers) (*General Rides Again*, 1962). Such planning served as a model for other public relations endeavors (Priswold, circa 1963). Following the Kennesaw event, the *General* went nearly 24,000 miles, half of them under its own power, the remaining on a specially-equipped set of flatcars. An estimated million people either rode behind the locomotive or visited its display at nearly 300 cities in seventeen states (News Bureau, 1967). Part of its tour included being displayed at the New York World’s Fair (Bonds, 2007).

Aftermath

As the Centennial ended, so did the *General's* duty for the L&N. Georgia legislators asked that it be donated for display in Kennesaw and after a custody dispute with the City of Chattanooga, the historic engine sits in the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History in Kennesaw (Bonds, 2007).

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