

A SANTA TRAIN CAR HOST'S GUIDE

SAFETY – CUSTOMER SERVICE - TEAMWORK

The Santa Train is THE major annual fundraising effort of our organization. The more successful the results of its operation, the less other fundraising we will have to do the rest of the year. Almost needless to say, our group would not last very long without adequate funds in its treasury, and membership dues cover only a small portion of our annual needs.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of our organization. Without you, the planning, preparation, and execution of excursions would be impossible. It requires months of effort by the members of the Santa Train committee as well as a considerable staff of members, friends, and family to operate it successfully every year. Many of you have been helping to run the train for some time now; others are somewhat new to it. This guide is intended to offer some fairly specific advice about our train's operation, not only for the benefit of the newcomers, but as a review for the rest of us.

There are three watchwords that are the basis of any successful operation. These are Safety, Customer Service, and Teamwork. These are essential to the ongoing success of our fund raising efforts. The lack of any one of them can bring any excursion program to a screeching halt—perhaps literally.

Our own personal safety and that of our passengers and fellow crewmembers is paramount in all we do. In today's litigious society, almost any seemingly trivial incident can result in a lawsuit the results of which can be out of all proportion to our value to our host railroad. Always remember that our first accident *will* occur on our last trip. The incident and the result are inexorably bound. We are guests here on the railroad and there is no requirement that we be allowed to return. It is incumbent upon us to be reasonably careful.

Without the train riding public, we would have no excursions to run. Our customers need to have an enjoyable experience or they will not return next year. (A surprising number are repeat customers and the Santa Train sometimes becomes a family tradition.) They are the reason we run the train. If they're happy, we're happy and vice versa. A happy customer is our best advertisement.

Teamwork is absolutely key to getting any operation running, keeping it going, and in putting it to bed at the end of the day. Without teamwork, the complexities of the operation quickly become overwhelming to both volunteers as individuals and the organization as a whole. "Many hands make for light work" and if we each do our part, there's no reason that excursions shouldn't be as enjoyable for the crew as they are for the passengers.

THANK YOU, AGAIN, FOR ALL YOU DO!

SAFETY

This is probably one of the few times during the year that we get close to a working railroad as a group. Very few of us are professional railroaders and it is important to remember that we have no special status on our host's property. The operating railroad is the ultimate authority concerning the operation of our train. Volunteers will please conform to the instructions of the operating railroad's personnel. Authorized railroad personnel will operate the equipment without any help from us. If you have keys that operate railroad equipment, please leave them at home.

Keep yourself safe. Encourage your fellow volunteers to think and act safely. Watch out for the safety of our customers, many of which are either infrequent or first-time train riders. If you see something, say something in a clear, positive and polite manner.

While there is simply no way to cover every possible safety issue in a document of this scope, please bear the following in mind:

Trains can move on any track, at any time, in either direction. Always stand well clear of the track. Stand behind the yellow lines on platforms. Use only authorized crossings. When necessary to cross a track, always look both ways at each track first. Never cross tracks between standing equipment. Never pass in front of standing equipment closer than fifteen feet.

Never run. Discourage others from running. Always watch your footing and your step. In periods of rain, snow, or ice steps and aisleways rapidly become slippery. Take shorter steps, take your time, and maintain a handhold on something stable such as a handrail, seatback, or baggage rack. Caution others to do the same.

When mounting or dismounting from equipment, maintain "three points of contact"—that is you should have two handholds on the handrails and one foot on the step. Never attempt to mount or dismount moving equipment.

Ensure that all materials are stored in a stable manner clear of aisleways and that anything in the baggage rack is situated so that it will stay put and not fall on someone's head.

THE BEST SAFETY DEVICE IS A CAREFUL PERSON.

THINK—THEN ACT SAFELY.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Immediately after the briefing, car hosts should inspect their cars for supplies and condition. The supplies required will vary with the nature and extent of the trip but may include such items as toilet paper and hand cleaner, trash containers, step boxes, decorations, trinket sales items, etc. Report all deficiencies to your section chief at the earliest possible moment.

Another important piece of business is to note the location of the bathrooms in the train—you're sure to be asked where the nearest one is at least once during the day. Take notes!

DECORATIONS

Decorating the train for the trip is an important activity first thing in the morning. Car hosts should attend to the decoration of their own car using the supplies provided. It is most important that the cars that will be used first get decorated first, so all other "extra" (floaters, elves, sales and ticketing personnel, etc.) staff should focus on assisting with the cars that will be boarded first, and then work their way through the rest of the train.

Remember that what goes up, must come down! Use tape sparingly and in such a manner that it can be completely removed both from the passenger car and any reusable decorations at the end of the day.

Probably the most basic method for decorating a car is to wrap garland or bunting down the exterior rail of the baggage racks on both sides of the car. Wreaths and other decorations can be attached to appropriate wall spaces. Be careful not to hide emergency equipment or fire extinguishers. One of the most visually effective "tricks" is to drape garland or bunting from baggage rack to baggage rack across the car, attaching the center to the car ceiling over the aisle. Use your best judgement and exercise your creativity! Have fun!

Depending on the arrangements, we may need to cover the windows in the aisle doors in order to disguise the movements of our Santa's and elves.

Car number signs should be placed: (1) in the windows at each end of the car on the platform side; (2) on the exterior of the car near each door on the platform side¹; and (3) on the interior of the car near each end.

COURTESY

Courtesy and respect are the keys to dealing with all our customers. While we need not follow Emily Post to the letter, it is helpful to deal with our customers in a somewhat formal, but nonetheless cordial, manner. "Please watch your step, sir"; "We have seats here, ma'am"; "Thank you for riding with us today", etc.—by all means be friendly, but be polite.

Also, please be careful with your attempts at humor, especially in "kidding" your customers or their children. It has happened that otherwise innocent remarks intended to lighten the occasion have been taken the wrong way and have caused undue hard feelings. Be careful!

Christmas has become a secular holiday enjoyed by people of diverse ethnicity's and beliefs. While many of your customers will readily wish you a "Merry Christmas", and thereby provide a

¹ It may be best to apply these when stopped at the first high level platform, if time permits. Use duct tape to apply these to the car exterior. Be aware that certain cars may not be used at certain stops and may not require exterior numbers on more than one side. See your section chief for instructions before attempting to number the exterior.

cue for your reply, it is probably best to wish your passengers a more generic “Happy Holidays” upon detraining.

BOARDING AND DETRAINING

Once the cars are decorated, it will soon be time to start boarding passengers. One stairway per car will be opened and manned by volunteers to assist passengers on to the cars. Since there may not always be a platform, all volunteers will focus on the safety of the passengers. Step boxes need to be positioned under the bottom car step and tested for adequate footing. Volunteers should place one foot on the bottom rung of the box both to assist in holding it in place and to detect slippage. Adults with small children, the elderly and infirm require close attention. Conditions may not always permit adequate placement of the step box. In these cases, direct passengers to proceed to the nearest safe stairway. Volunteers should also give close attention to the safety of passengers, and especially small children, entraining and detraining at high level platforms due to the gap that always exists between the train and the platform.

Passengers should be encouraged to take their time and watch their step. I find it helpful to say “Take your time; watch your step, please” about every six to eight passengers when there are lines to get either on or off at the vestibules.

SEATING

We make it a point to undersell the available seats in each car so that our passengers can have a seat with an adjacent window. Unfortunately, there are always some customers who get on your car and proceed to spread themselves out. Try to head this off by announcing “We expect to have a full car today, please seat yourself efficiently”, or words to that effect. Better yet, place one of the car hosts at the far end of the car and encourage passengers to move all the way forward before attempting to seat themselves. With the 3 – 2 seating of most passenger cars, it is a simple matter to seat a family of any size. A family of four can take two twos; a family of five a three and a two; a family of six two threes or three twos...you get the idea. Don’t be afraid to resettle some of the passengers if need be; with a little tact and courtesy, as well as a little forethought on your part, most passengers are happy to comply.

We generally sell only 90 to 95 tickets per car, which almost always have a real capacity of 100 to 120. One of the unintended benefits of having so many small children as passengers is that they often take up less than a seat apiece. This should allow you, as car host, to make minor adjustments for families or small groups of friends who show up and want to ride together, but did not think to make prior arrangements when purchasing tickets.

There may be space set aside for groups who have arranged to sit together. This will be covered in the morning briefing and handed out with the passenger manifest.

If by some unhappy circumstance your car is beyond capacity, it generally means that some other section of the train is half-empty. Consult with your neighboring car hosts and/or the section chief to find your customers appropriate seats.

TICKETS

With the advent of Internet ticket sales, the traditional railroad ticket is fast disappearing. Do not be surprised or upset if your passengers present an 8 ½” by 11” piece of paper from their computer printer and claim it is a ticket—**it is!** Fortunately, the vast majority of our passengers are honest people and not trying to pull a fast one. If you have doubts, either the section chief, the ticketing staff, or you will have been provided with a printout of the expected passengers, so verification is a simple matter. Some tickets may still be the old fashion

cardstock type provided with a detachable coupon. Ticket verification should begin as soon as the passengers have boarded and are settled in. Verifications need not be an “enforcement action”; just a simple request that passengers produce documentation and a spot check should be adequate. Cardstock tickets should be punched and/or the coupons collected. Passengers without tickets should be referred to one of the on train agents or the section chief. Ticket stubs, if any, should be remitted to the section chief at the end of each day.

On some groups’ trains, prizes are raffled off. With the new Internet ticketing, it will be necessary to distribute raffle tickets and collect the stubs. This process offers a good opportunity to simultaneously check the passenger’s transportation.

DISTRIBUTION OF “STUFF”

The types and amount of “stuff” that needs to be distributed varies according to the organization running the train. “Stuff” includes things like soft drinks and snacks, coloring books and/or crayons, candy canes, gifts, raffle tickets, or literature of various kinds.

Santa, his wife or his elves will usually distribute the Candy Canes and Gifts, while other things, like Coloring Books, may be distributed by the car hosts. Your Santa team may have its own idea about who gives out what, so be governed accordingly. Inventories on each car and may need to be periodically “balanced” from car to car, but do not to hoard stuff to the detriment of others. It should be obvious, but you should expect to run low on “stuff” at the end of the day. If the committee officers have done their job well, there should be an adequate supply of all materials somewhere on the train.

When required, Car Hosts will please distribute snacks, soft drinks, and literature to their passengers as soon as possible after departure. If Santa or other characters are in your car, suspend distribution until he/they are gone. After all, our customers have come to be entertained, not merely to have stuff thrust at them.

MISCELLANEOUS

On some groups’ trains, the car hosts will handle Sales of “trinkets”. These need not be active sales, as the cars already are busy with snack distribution, traveling singers, and Santa visits. Trinkets should be displayed at one end of the car and will usually generate sufficient interest among the passengers to sell themselves. A sales crew will keep supplies balanced throughout the train.

Announcements will usually be handled via the train’s public address system by some designated person. Should the system break down, Car Hosts will please make announcements thanking our customers for riding with us today and reminding them to inspect their seating areas for personal belongings prior to detraining. Non-routine announcements will be made concerning unscheduled stops, or other issues, as appropriate, in as timely a manner as possible.

While most of the train will be closed after detraining is complete, some cars in the train will be left open to permit passengers and crew to board at will. Therefore, volunteers should close aisle doors to conserve power and ease the load on the HVAC system while the train is standing.

Prevent a larger mess by periodically passing through your car with a trash container to collect the empty wrappers, soft drink containers, etc. that will generated.

A HAPPY CUSTOMER IS OUR BEST ADVERTISEMENT.

TEAMWORK

It should be clear to everyone having read thus far that our focus should be on the customer and their experience. Happy customers make for a profitable fundraiser, year in and year out. However, we are also railfans and the temptation to sneak in a little photography or sightseeing is always with us. To be honest, we can probably get away with a little of this in our off moments. On the other hand, if you've come out mostly to ride the train and just hang out, you need to adjust your outlook.

Injuries or emergencies of any kind are to be brought to the attention of the section chief, the regular train crew and the EMTs, if available. On trips where no EMT's are available, the regular train crew should be promptly notified. We are usually within a few minutes of any given station and our host railroads have radio communication to a dispatcher who can summon professional emergency responders at a moment's notice. Fortunately, real emergencies have been few and far between, but be prepared.

It is also important to realize that something like a passenger experiencing chest pains or having difficulty breathing is an emergency. Running out of coloring books and crayons is not. Maintain a sense of proportion.

One of the most useful pieces of advice is something we call "**Rule V.**" The rule states: "Despite the huge amounts of inspiration, planning, strategy and logistics that go into making excursions trouble-free for everyone, it is often necessary to amend, drastically modify, or entirely abandon any given plan, frequently on the shortest of notice." While we wish we didn't need this rule, it is important to note that the legendary Mr. Murphy rides with us frequently. This is also known as the "Depends Rule", i.e.; ***everything depends.*** Volunteers affected by this rule are requested to do everything within their power to make the transition to the new plan as smooth as possible. Anything or everything we have planned for any given trip may have to change at a moment's notice. Be prepared, be flexible, be supportive.

An important aspect of Rule V is "Game Face". When things go wrong it is easy to get frustrated, angry or otherwise "bent out of shape." This has sometimes lead to displays of temper or "attitude", frequently in front of customers who have later commented on it. When Rule V intervenes, smile and maintain your composure even if all others around you are losing theirs! Please, deal with whatever shortcomings may arise in a calm, collected, even-tempered professional manner. Feedback regarding any issues that develop can, and should, be given at the next committee, membership, or board meeting. Our operations should appear seamless to our customers.

Likewise, our customers may have issues, or bring them on board with them. In situations where a passenger or other person becomes disorderly, rude, obscene, abusive, or threatens violence, volunteers are cautioned to remain calm and discreetly summon the section chief, on-board law enforcement officer, or the regular train crew. Smoking is prohibited. The public consumption of alcohol is prohibited. If passengers will not voluntarily cease these activities, volunteers will notify the section chief or the regular train crew.

Passengers are allowed to eat on the train. Service animals are allowed, other pets should be discouraged.

Some groups consider "uniforms" optional, but they do lend a great deal to the operation of our trains. Some form of uniform dress code keeps the group from looking like the passengers. A uniform sets the volunteer crew apart from the crowd and readily identifies the people in charge of the train to arriving passengers. It provides the individual crewmember with a symbol of authority and helps eliminate confusion.

For our male car hosts, uniform should consist of gray dress slacks, white shirt with red tie, blue dress jacket, black shoes (no sneakers), if possible. Attire for the ladies should mimic that of the men. Nametags should be provided. Santa, Mrs. Santa, Elves and Helpers will dress in costume or as seasonally appropriate. If the recommended dress uniform is unavailable, please come dressed presentably.

Shoes with slip resistant soles and sturdy enough to withstand the rigors of railroad rights of way are recommended, as are work gloves for material handling. Rain gear and/or overcoats, as appropriate, are recommended for inclement weather. A small pocket flashlight is advisable when the train is likely to operate in darkness.

Lunch (Sandwiches, snacks, & beverages) will be provided by the group. Please take ONLY one lunch. Water and soft drinks will also be available on the train. Lunch may be scheduled or unscheduled, but there will be a period during mid-day when car hosts will have an idle trip and can take advantage of the time to enjoy a meal.

Those who may need to take medications or control blood-sugar levels should take the precaution of carrying whatever daily supplies they may require.

Usually, section chiefs and EMTs (if any) will be provided with two-way radios. Due to the large numbers of others equipped with scanners, radio communications should be brief, professional, and discrete. Cell phone numbers are sometimes printed in the crew's handout so that various teams or individuals can contact each other should issues arise.

ADVICE TO SECTION CHIEFS:

The crew assignments have been set up to make the best use of the various talents of our volunteers as well as place them with the people with whom they would most like to work. If at all possible, leave the plan alone. If, for some unforeseen reason you run short of people, you still have the following resources: (1) the floaters; (2) yourselves; (3) the sales and ticketing teams; (4) the station platform crews after they are done with the last trip from their respective stations. In addition, most of the car host teams are experienced people who can easily take on a second car in an emergency.

IN CONCLUSION

While this guide covers a lot of individual points, most of them are simple, common sense items. Hopefully, this guide has helped to refresh you on the various aspects of this important activity that we undertake every year at this time.

Thank you again for volunteering! We couldn't do any of this without you!

Happy Holidays!