

Introduction

This document provides guidance and useful information for organizing freestanding SIG meetings, operations meets and activities as part of an NMRA regional meet, RPM or some similar event. This document is not a set of rules, but merely a collection of suggestions, useful experience and best practices: as the organizer of a regional/local meet you will want to apply the guidelines to your local situation. The successful project manager will borrow and adapt as necessary to meet local requirements.

The OPSIG serves its membership through its publications and a robust program held with the annual NMRA convention. Unfortunately, only about 10-15% of the membership can attend the National in any given year and about half of them are “regulars” leaving perhaps 80% of the total membership without personal contact more than once every 10 years or so, when the National convention is local to them. Local meets are powerful tools for delivering service to members in the absence of a national meet in the area, and they a lot of fun!

Local meets provide the following benefits to members:

- Opportunity to operate on layouts outside of the member’s immediate circle of friends
- Education through clinic and panel discussion programs
- Opportunity to meet fellow modelers concerned with similar operating issues
- Opportunity to become active in work/construction groups and operating groups
- General integration into the modeling and rail fan community

Benefits to the OPSIG:

- Delivery of service demonstrates performance on our 501c(3) obligation as an educational institution
- Providing local and in person service will attract more new members.
- Creating a venue for social interactions builds member value and helps member retention
- Write-ups of clinics and panels at regional/local meets provides content for the DO
- Expanding local activities creates a larger base of experience and expertise which can be shared with other regional/local groups and the national convention committee

Target Audience of Meets

- SIG members
- Potential SIG members (anyone who enjoys operating)

Generally participation is open to current members of the OPSIG (and to members of other sponsoring organizations if we are planning an ops component to another meet such as a regional convention or RPM meet)

General kinds of Meets

Table 1: Meet types:

Type of Meet	Participants	Suggested Activities	Joint With	Duration
In-home	<20	Meet & Greet, Show & Tell, Operate the host's layout	Usually SIG only	4-8 hours
Roundtable at Convention	<30	Meet & Greet, Show & Tell	Local NMRA region	2-3 hours
Free-standing meet (often joint with LDSIG)	30 – 150 (typ)	Welcome Dinner Clinic Program Discussion Panels Birds-of-a-Feather Consulting Program Design Challenge Layout Tours OP Sessions Prototype tours	LD SIG, NMRA Region, solicit other likely sponsors	1 – 2 days
Meet with Historical Society or RPM	30 – 250 (typ)	Clinic Program Discussion Panels Birds-of-a-Feather Layout Tours OP Sessions Prototype tours	Hist Socs with local presence	2- 4 days
SIG Track at NMRA Regional	50 Sig/300 total	Clinic Program Discussion Panels Layout Tours OP Sessions Prototype tours	Local NMRA region	1-3 days
Operations Weekend	20 – 150	OP Sessions Clinic Program Layout tours Event at local Hobby Shop	Usually organized by a local group of operators who are connected with OPSIG	2-3 days

Process and Procedure to be Applied to the Meets above

Finances

Most of these events are fairly low overhead until you get into renting halls and a lot of AV equipment. Our advice is to keep it modest, leverage public and charitable organizations for facilities and see if members can borrow projectors from members or other organizations (some of the historical societies and NRMA regions own projectors). The donation request should be designed to cover expenses and provide some seed money for next year's event. I've included typical financials for the Bay Area Regional meet for guidance:

PCR LD/OP SIG Meet Financials

	2004	2005	2006	
Registration				
Pre-Registrations	119	107	110	
Pre-Registrations who showed	98	82	93	
Walk-Ups	22	12	13	
Total Attendance	120	94	106	
Pre-Registration no show:	21	25	17	
Paid Attendees	111	90	104	(3)
SBHA Complimentary:	1	1	1	
Very late arrivals	4	2	1	(5)
Est. # people missed in rush	4	1	1	
Op Sessions				
# Hosting Layouts			6	
# Ops slots			62	
# SIG Guest Operators	60-70	60-70	62	
Cash Flow				
Cash from Registration \$	555	450	530	

Seed \$ from previous year		50		
Handouts/Mailings				
	-174	-185	-100	(2)
	-2	-20	-113	(2)
Name Tags etc	-20	-20	-28	(2)
Refreshments	-228	-186	-175	(2)
tubs		-23		
Seed \$ for next year	-50			
Donation to SBHS	-55	-50	-50	
Donation to NMRA	-26	-50		
Net Cash Total From Meet \$	0	-34	(1) 64	(4)

Expense per attendee

Announcement mailout			-\$0.94	21%
	-\$1.63	-\$2.39		
Handouts & name tags at meet			-\$1.33	30%
Refreshments	-\$1.90	-\$1.98	-\$1.65	38%
Venue Donation	-\$0.46	-\$0.53	-\$0.47	11%
Total	-\$3.99	-\$4.90	-\$4.40	

Location and Logistics

Geographical location will depend on the presence of a host committee, but suitable venues include homes, Model Railroad clubs, community centers, schools, church meeting rooms, museums and hotels, depending on the scope of the event (see table 1). A “railroad” venue such as a club in an old depot is a nice touch if space is adequate.

Sites should have the following accommodations/ features:

- Adequate seating for expected attendance
- Adequate (preferably free) parking

- In large meets, rooms for break outs, consulting, BOFs and displays
- AV facilities including sound, screens, projectors, power
- Permission to provide refreshments and facilities for providing them
- Proximity to suitable restaurants or provision to bring food in
- Consider handicap accessibility

Layout Tours and Op Sessions

One member of the local committee should organize the layout tours. These are usually selected on the basis of :

- Overall quality
- Innovative design or construction
- Host's ability to document design process, prototype
- Accessibility and parking (don't send 30 cars up a winding, single lane mountain road at night)
- Note where layouts are not handicap accessible
- insurance – see below
- Provide comprehensive descriptions. It is important that attendees know what they are going to see before committing to traveling a considerable distance.
- Maps and instructions! Be sure they work: have someone who doesn't know where the layouts are test drive them . If you are going GPS only be sure that the location is actually navigable, check! Beware of last minute construction and road work that may affect the directions.
- See layout selection criteria in the exhibits

Operating Sessions

- This can be done by the layout tour coordinator or another individual
- Layouts should be known to run well and have at least 3 prior op sessions with the regular crew before opening up to an event like this
- The committee may want to request a private session with the owner and some of the regulars if the layout is not known to them
- Very small layouts may cause carpooling problems and are more prone to problems due to last minute cancellations
- Provide comprehensive descriptions (use the selection rubric below. It is important that attendees know what they are going to see before committing to traveling a considerable distance.)

Clinic Selection

Generally the most popular clinics for Ops meet cover the operation of a prototype or some aspect of simulating prototype operations. Experiences of prototype railroaders are usually popular. List of previous clinic topics from the Bay Area meet:

- Yosemite Valley Paperwork

- WP Oakland 3rd St Depot
- DCC for Ops/Design for DCC
- Montana Pacific Revisited
- DCC conversion of the Durlin Branch
- Changes in the Santa Cruz Northern
- How to operate
- Ops for Dummies
- DCC Ops considerations
- Lego Train Operations
- NYO&W Kingston Branch
- Variations on the timesaver
- Getting an existing layout ready to operate
- UP, NP, and YVT in Eastern Washington
- WP & SN in Marysville
- Telephones for Operations
- SP in Lathrop
- Salt Lake Expansion of Western Pacific layout
- Garden Railway design for ops
- Railroad Paperwork
- Panel Pro
- Modeling Milk
- Car Cards for Realistic Operation
- State Belt Railroad
- Adaptable Operations
- Southern Pacific Santa Barbara Subdivision
- 20 Years of Operations Organizing
- Researching the Prototype to Design a Prototypical WP Layout
- Los Osos Valley Railroad: SP Coast line from San Luis Obispo to Paso Robles in 1949

We've also had short (5 minute) updates on previous clinics to update on the lessons learned.

Publicity

- Obtain mailing list of SIG members in the target region from the Board and do mailings
- Obtain mailing lists of members of other sponsoring organization in the target region and do mailings (check for overlap first, there will be a lot of it)
- Publicize in DO ,LDJ, local NMRA region and pubs of other sponsoring organizations
- Calendar on OP, LD SIG websites
- Magazines: Scale Rails, MR, RMC, MRH
- Publicize early and often on email lists of all sponsoring organizations
- Flyers at local hobby shops, train shows
- Refer to the websites of the layouts, if they have them, in the publicity, also refer to published articles about them
- Web sites – see the Bay Area site at <http://www.pcrnmra.org/sigs/>

Liability

There is a concern about liability for personal injury in any public event. Two main concerns are for injuries that may occur at a central meeting place and injuries that might occur in a home or club where a layout tour or operating session is held. In the case of injuries at a meeting place, the owner of the space (club, school, church, community center, etc.) may request a certificate of coverage.

As of this writing, the OP SIG does not have liability insurance. After discussion with the NMRA leadership, the OP SIG recommends the following:

1. Arrange for the local NMRA region to jointly sponsor the event. (See above under “Joint meets with LD SIG and NMRA Regions or Historical Societies, or RPM”). Note that the NMRA region’s name must come first as in “Pacific Coast Region/LD SIG/OP SIG meet”
2. If a certificate is required, write the NMRA 6-8 weeks in advance asking for the certificate. Be sure to indicate the “who, what, when, why” and who the certificate is covering. There is a processing charge for the certificate (as of this writing it is \$25), this can be paid out of the contributions.
3. For layouts, make sure that all the homeowners/clubs are NMRA members. If not, enroll them (As of this writing, you can use the \$9.95 6 month “railpass” introductory membership, however if the owner is going to open every year it would be better to use a full membership.). We suggest you pay for this out of the registration funds. The layout owners must be NMRA members for the coverage to be in effect. Do this far enough in advance that the membership is sure to be in effect at the time of the meet.

Reporting/Sharing

OP SIG Inc. is a 501c(3) educational organization and our bylaws call for us to:

- To act as a forum for the members' exchange of information and ideas, and to develop improved ways for hobbyists to learn the art and science of layout design.
- To provide leadership for planning, developing, coordinating, and expanding the knowledge of operating model railroads; and
- To promote, develop, support and encourage participation by the public in model railroading.

In order to help fulfill these obligations, we strongly encourage that all meets have one or more designated scribes who will note the proceedings with a view towards recording the events and especially innovative ideas. These ideas may be found in the clinics, panels, BOF sessions and of course on the layout visits. The reports should be submitted to the DO editor for publication and clinic presenters should be encouraged to put their material into article form for use by the DO. We also provide a summarized version to the editors of the newsletters of any co-sponsoring organizations.

Registration process for Presentations and Panels

Two or more people should man the desk, Bay Area experience suggests the registration table be "remote staffed" after the first hour up to the lunch break by someone chartered to keep their eye out late arrivals and get through the registration sign in process.

Volunteering to man the registration desk has the added bonus of being a great way to meet a lot of people!

The registration team should be at the venue 1 hour prior to the advertised opening. Our experience suggests the registration table be "remote staffed" after the first hour up to the lunch break by someone chartered to keep their eye out late arrivals and get through the registration sign in process. Be sure to provide for the following:

- Chairs and tables for registration
- Pre printed registration signs that include the meet name, date, time, sponsoring organization(s) and registration fee.
- Masking tape to post registration signs
- Pre-registration lists
- walk-up registration sign in form separate from the pre-registration sign in lists
- Pre-printed badges for pre-registrants (The Bay Area group uses badges with a space for name, era, road, interest)
- Badge holders
- Transparent tape to use on name tag holders if the badge holders are prone to popping open.
- Box of pens for name tag fill ins.
- Dollars for making change for those ATM \$20 bills everyone has.
- paper weights of some type to keep the stacks of handouts in check
- Blank badges for walk ups
- Agenda/schedules
- Special arrangements for parking, if necessary (e.g. change for parking ticket machines, validation stamps as required)
- Membership application forms for all of the sponsoring organizations
- Sample copies of publications of all the sponsoring organizations
- Container for receipts

Each attendee should be checked in and any fees collected, the registrant is given his (her) badge and agenda

Registration process for Operations Meets

Two or more people should man the desk. BayRails is 3 all day sessions so we man the desk (which is often in a suite provided by the meet hotel) the evening before and the first morning.

Be sure to provide for the following:

- Chairs and tables for registration
- Pre printed registration signs that include the meet name, date and time. We don't charge a registration fee, but that is usually done by PayPal in advance at Ops Meets that charge.
- Masking tape to post registration signs
- Pre-registration lists
- Pre-printed badges for pre-registrants
- Badge holders
- Transparent tape to use on name tag holders if the badge holders are prone to popping open.
- paper weights of some type to keep the stacks of handouts in check
- Agenda/schedules
- Special arrangements for parking, if necessary (e.g. change for parking ticket machines, validation stamps as required)

Each attendee should be checked in and the registrant is given his (her) badge and agenda

Food/ local restaurant guidelines (for Presentations and Panels)

The first step is to obtain an accurate headcount of expected attendees. Asking the Registrar is probably the best way to obtain the pre-event registration headcount. Then add on for later registrations as well as walk-in registrations. These latter categories are best determined by the experience of past years for the same, or similar, events. In the end, a total anticipated headcount is the basic number from which all else flows.

The second step is to decide what kind of beverages are desired and what are the preferences of attendees. After taking two surveys of this particular topic, it is my opinion that most of the guys really don't give two hoots about what they eat or drink -- within broad limits. Therefore, the following ideas are my own opinions unsubstantiated by any facts at all. In the cold mornings, hot coffee is a highly desired beverage. In warmer afternoons, cold soda pops (Coke, 7-Up, root beer, etc.) are good choices. Do not overlook plain old bottled water which ranks right up there with soda pop in the popularity contest for beverages. Lemonade, ice tea and other healthier drinks are popular, but to a much lesser degree. You should assume 1-1/2 servings of hot beverage per person in the morning and another 1-1/2 servings of cold beverage per person in the afternoon. It is best to avoid alcohol in any form. Some folks really feel strongly about this.

The third step is to decide about solid (non-liquid) refreshments. In the cold mornings, hot doughnuts, bagels, warm pastries, etc. are popular. In the warm afternoons, fresh fruit such as bananas, apples, grapes, cherries, etc. are popular.. You should assume 1-1/2 servings of solid refreshments per person in the morning and another 1-1/2 servings of snacks per person in the afternoon.

Fourth step is to astutely find the cheapest source of buying all the desired stuff. BevMo (Beverages & More) or CostCo are good places for the liquid beverages. Krispy Kreme works fine for freshly cooked doughnuts. With Krispy Kreme, it is best to place an order at least four days prior to the event in order to obtain a healthy price discount. About a 20% discount is available if I remember correctly. A good high-quality upscale produce retail outlet is best for the fresh fruit. Fresh fruit should generally be purchased two to three days before the event to allow it to fully ripen by the day of the event. Chain grocery stores rarely have good quality produce although there are probably exceptions to this general observation. Chain stores do just fine for ice, candy bars, etc. Yes, ice will be needed in order to keep the cold drinks cold. Also, some large tubs in which to keep the ice and soda pop will be needed. Also, determine who will supply the equipment needed to make hot coffee. As a general rule, buy the best quality stuff you can find. Cheap doughnuts will result in complaints. Outstanding doughnuts will result in compliments. The same holds for the fruit.

Fifth step is to find a helper guy to help you unload all the stuff from your car and set it up at the event. Do not try to do this all by yourself. It is too much work and the stuff gets heavy in a hurry. Just ask around and someone will volunteer to help you. He will also help you clean up the mess and discard the melted water, boxes, etc. after the event is over. Take the tubs home and save them for use the following year. Leftover cans of soda pop can also be kept for a full year and used over again. Contrary to some opinions, the stuff does not go stale.

Sixth step is to use MapQuest, or something similar, to print out a map of all restaurants within a 10 mile radius. This map is handed out in the morning and becomes the basis for attendees to decide where to go for lunch. The same map could apply to dinner if dinner is part of the event.

Enjoy yourself and don't blame me for the calorie count.

Criteria for Ops and Display layouts

I found most of the host layouts via the OP SIG mailing list. The rest came from people the OP SIG people knew. In urban areas, it's easier to find layouts than in rural areas, and there are likely various round robin groups and clubs to draw on as well. Layouts need not have scenery, but they should have been operated a few times before the event.

The size of an operating event is determined by how many layouts you can round up, how many operators each layout can accommodate and how many sessions a layout owner is willing and able to host over a weekend. Some layout owners have some sort of thru or continuous staging, and can host 3 sessions in a weekend. Folks with stub staging probably won't be able to do this. The BayRails group in California does not ask owners to run on consecutive days because of the reset issue.

Be sure to summarize the information gathered in the rubrics below (one for display layouts and the other for Operating Layouts) so that attendees can choose layouts that meet their interests. For Ops Meets there should be a website that summarizes the rubric information and has links to individual pages with photos, track diagrams and paperwork if available. Most Ops Meets have an online form for layout selection.

For layout tours provide a copy of the rubric and an overall map. Detailed maps seem to have been overtaken by GPS/NAV systems although it doesn't hurt to have some hard copy maps on hand as backup.

In all cases, an overview area map showing relative locations should be provided. All layout tours in the PCR (including the SIG meet) use a secure web site with maps.

Layout Selection Rubric for LD SIG Tour

Name: _____
 Address: _____
 City: _____ ZIP: _____ Phone _____
 No: _____ (G/O/S/HO/N/Z) Railroad Name: _____

Accessibility	1 Handicapped Hostile	2 multiple steps, sills duck-unders	3 1 to 2 steps average house	4 no significant hazards	5 Special height or lifts
Size	1 4X8 sheet or smaller	2 Bedroom full 10' X 10'	3 About a one car garage 10' X 16'	4 Most of a two car garage 20' X 16'	5 Fills California Ranch 20' X 30' +
Scenery	1 Plywood Central	2 Less than 50%	3 Scenery well begun but not finished	4 Woodland Scenics everywhere	5 Every inch fully sceniced and detailed to match reality
Mechanics and reliability	1 "You mean that the trains are supposed to run"	2 Halting train movements. Electrical problems	3 Reliable operations	4 Interesting for technical reasons	5 Glitchless operations with multiple trains
Layout Design	1	2	3	4	5

	Bowl of Spaghetti or simple oval	One of the better choices out of “101 Track Plans”	Can be made to operate with a few compromises	Coherent layout. Possible to understand.	Clear and logical progression driven by theme
Feature or theme	1 Generic Railroad running on plastic grass Mat	2 Generic era: steam, diesel or transition	3 Attempt to recreate some specific road or place	4 Few anachronisms	5 Jack Burgess True to a prototype and era

Operations

- Innovative techniques

(Structural, Electrical, Scenery)

- Narrow gauge
- Garden Railway
- Traction
- Well Documented (brochures, schematics, etc.)

Subjective Factors:

- How far out of your way would you go to see this layout? _____
- General Comments and things we should know.
- Well known: Locally/Nationally/Magazines/etc.

_____ List

Layout Selection for Operations Rubric from BayRails

(San Francisco Bay Area local operations meet)

This form is more suited to selecting which layouts the participant would want to operate.

Layout Evaluation

Size	5 500 sq ft. plus Large home or club sized	4 400 sq ft. 20' by 20' Garage or basement	3 200 sq ft. 10' by 20' Half a garage	2 100 sq ft. 10' by 10' Small bedroom	1 50 sq ft. 5' by 10' Half a bedroom
Scenery	5 Full scenery, exceptional detail	4 Full scenery	3 2/3 rd scenery	2 1/3 rd scenery	1 Plywood Central
Prototype /theme	5 Full fidelity to prototype	4 Some compromises with prototype or freelance.	3 Attempts to evoke specific era/time	2 Generic era/RR	1 Mix of eras, railroads and locations
Rigorousness	5 Tightly structured per prototype.	4 Closely adheres to prototype practice	3 Purposeful operations	2 Attempts at prototype operations	1 “Holler and Hope” operations
Theme, prototype, and location of the layout:	Documentation, Orientation and Signage: _ Fascia mounted track diagrams _ Station names / MPs on fascia _ Handout describing layout and op session purpose _ Timetable if appropriate		Pace of operating session _ Fast Clock _ Sequence		
Purpose of the railroad and/or operating session	Car Forwarding Scheme _ Car Cards _ Switch list _ Computer generated _ Tacks or markers on cars _ Other: _____ _____		Tone and Atmosphere of operating session _ No extraneous conversation _ Fairly disciplined _ Casual _ Other:		
Operating scheme:					

TT&TO CTC Track Warrant/DTC ABS/Rule 251

Other: _____

Control system:

DC / Block Control DCC / System: _____ Other:

Communication system:

5 Channel radio FRS Radio Telephone Other: _____ None

Other important features of operations:

Layout Name		Owner name	
Address:		City	State
Phone:	Email:		Zip

Sample Timelines

The following times lines are provided for guidance and to provide an idea of how much advance planning is required. Roles are identified for reference. The coordinator (project manager) should be aware that these are generic plans and that not all the tasks will be required for each event, nor will the intervals always work for your event. The wise project manager will modify these to suit while leveraging the information in this guide. Make only new mistakes!