

Those Freight RR TV Commercials

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It is refreshing to see BNSF, CSX and NS promoting rail freight transportation with their well-crafted television commercials, the effectiveness of which is confirmed by public comments and questions heard by those of us who have felt that the rail freight industry had for too long hidden its light under the proverbial bushel. There is no question but that people have a strong desire to see more freight diverted from highway to rail. We earnestly hope that public support for freight rail development can be sustained, but to do so will eventually require more than catchy TV spots. Eventually, the public will inevitably reach the point of asking: "Where's the beef?"

Already one can see evidence of aggressive claims served up in rail advocacy pieces such as one attributed to freelance writer Brian Palmer, whose commentary appeared in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Sunday, August 8, 2010. "*U.S. trains may not be the best at moving people, but they're great at moving everything else.*" But are they? That particular writer, whose rail transportation credentials we have not yet been able to ascertain, recited the industry claim that the freight railroads can, on average, move a ton of freight 436 miles on a single gallon of diesel. Sure they can, if it is a fifteen-to-twenty thousand-ton trainload of coal trundling across the prairies; often they can even do much better. But what about much lighter-loaded trailers and containers, the latter stacked two-high and relatively far apart, a less favorable weight ratio and aerodynamic profile?

To their credit, as stewards of shareholder financial interests, private rail managers have developed a successful business model based upon shedding much of the former rail network and fixed plant, bidding goodbye to former customers, concentrating instead on lines of business that private freight rails can do well, and profitably. Pricing power is everything! That's exactly what they are hired to do, but it is not what the public necessarily expects, and therein lies the communications challenge.

With few exceptions, freight railroads, in the fifty-plus-year history of rail-highway intermodal ("IM") transportation, originally dubbed "piggyback", have never successfully figured out how to compete with highway movement of cargo in corridors of 500 miles or less. Yet that is where most trucks are; driving motorists crazy. If the subliminal message of current rail commercials on TV is to become a reality, big changes will be required in public transportation policy and funding, in the technology and operational methodology used by the rails, and in the fixed plant of the rails, which contrary to Brian Palmer's assertion, will not "*take the punishment of rumbling freight trains for decades with little maintenance*". Big trains like big trucks are hard on the infrastructure. And that's another challenge; finding valuable track time to repair it.

Rail IM development is a goal well worth pursuing, but it isn't as simple as the TV spots would suggest. NS, CSX and VA DRPT, should prepare to show the public quantitative results if they hope to sustain public investment in freight rail infrastructure. Truck/rail IM conversion progress is as relevant as Amtrak ridership trends.

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