

Go Where the Work Happens



In 1977, advertising executive Peter Marsh faced a big challenge and a bigger opportunity for his upstart ad firm.

British Rail, the state-owned UK passenger train system, needed a new marketing campaign and asked for proposals from all the top ad firms in London.

But Marsh saw the real problem. British Rail was a mess. Trains didn't run on time. Ridership was falling. The public hated the experience. It was like having the DMV and TSA in charge of trains.

British Rail thought the solution was better ads. But Marsh knew that wouldn't work—not without fixing the product first.

So he invited the British Rail executives to his office for a pitch.

When they arrived, something was off.

The lobby was filthy. Trash overflowed onto a cigarette-covered floor. Lights were burned out and no one was at the front desk. After a few awkward minutes, a rude, unhelpful receptionist showed up. She didn't seem to know anything about the meeting and didn't care.

Finally, the executives turned to leave. That's when Marsh appeared.

With a smile, he said: *"Gentlemen, you've just experienced what the public's impression of British Rail is. Now, come this way, and we'll show you how we're going to change that."*

Marsh had staged the entire scene. He didn't need to tell the executives what was wrong; he made them feel it. That pitch won the account and launched the "Age of the Train" campaign. But the real impact came later, when British Rail improved service, launched better fares, and earned back trust.

The lesson was clear: **no ad campaign can fix a broken product.**

Go Where the Work is Happening

In business, to fix a problem, you must go where the work is actually happening. Not in reports, not in meetings, but in the field, with the people doing the job. While Marsh didn't run the rail, he recreated the scene where the work was done.

Today, transit agencies like SEPTA face a similar challenge. Operating costs are up. Ridership is down. As of March, SEPTA is still at just 75% of pre-pandemic ridership. And now Governor Shapiro wants to redirect nearly \$300 million from sales tax revenue to bail it out.

But the problem isn't marketing. It's the service. Just this month, four people were shot on a SEPTA bus. Riders don't feel safe. The experience is unreliable. And taxpayers are expected to foot the bill.

Throwing more money at the problem won't fix it. Instead, take a page from Peter Marsh. Before any new funding is approved, go to where the work is actually happening.

Take a ride. See the experience firsthand. Walk through the station. Wait on the platform. That's where you'll see what riders see. One hour on the bus will tell you more than any sanitized report or committee presentation ever could.

The Bottom Line

Remember Peter Marsh, and before bailing out a broken system, go see what riders live every day. The fixes start where the work happens.