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If Drag Racing were a bus, then I am a passenger on that bus. I don't get to steer or even flick the turn signals but I can talk to other passengers (all of you) and complain to the driver.

As usual I have more questions than I have answers. Often, I find as soon as I do find an answer, it only makes another half dozen questions. I hope this does not wander about too much, because the questions and subsequent answers often take us different places. Please bear with me. Complex situations seldom have simple answers.

Something that has been on my mind for a while now, is where do new racers come from? As a motor sport, is Drag Racing growing or shrinking? This concerns me for at least two reasons, first since I have spent my life Drag Racing it is important to me and second my business supplies Drag Racers so is my client base growing or shrinking? And once you have the answer, the second part of that question is why? And lastly if it is growing then good, how can we grow it faster but if it shrinking how can we reverse the direction? These are not rhetorical questions but things we need to answer if we are to insure we are still around in the future.

Let me qualify one point here before we go any further. Profit drives us all. Drag Racing is no different. A Drag Race event takes two groups of customers, brings them together and the result is more at night than you had in the morning. Spectators pay to attend the race, consume food and drink and are entertained for a price.

Racers pay entry fees to attend the event, consume food and drink and work their butts off.

If the racer does well on the day, the idea is that with his winnings he will go home with more money than it cost them to survive the day. If it was really about making money they would make more working at McDonalds for the day (probably less work too). So if it is not about making money then it has to be about respect. I will cover more on this later, but consider the Respect.

Drag Racing is and entertainment medium. Drag Racing is participation medium. Both are true statements, but I believe it has shifted from a participation medium of yesterday to an entertainment medium of today. Historically, at one point many spectators were interested parties that had a desire to potentially participate and their attendance at the track was to learn about how to do something that they aspired to, but I think that is changing. Big events such as the Winternationals only confirm this. There are many races where there are a lot of quality race cars with few spectators yet those cars are at the Winternationals and the place is packed, by comparison, abet less packed than it has been before. People attend the Winternationals because it has grown from just a race to an event, maybe I should capitalise that, an EVENT. If most of the spectators came to a race to lean about something they wanted to participate in attendance at

smaller events would be strong, and it isn't. The Winternationals is a large event that appeals to spectators expecting to be entertained.

The declining spectator attendance at major races confirms my theory about the changing composition of the spectator crowd. Now they are here for a show, a spectacular if you will, and the declining attendance also confirms maybe we are not as good at the show stuff as we should be, or maybe we don't treat our Drag Race Spectator customers with the respect they demand and deserve. No shade on hot days, oil downs and a slow show, all contribute to taking a good show and running it for the Drag Race Spectator. We need to give them a good show and do it for them in comfort. Because that is what our competitors in the entertainment business are doing. I understand that Pro categories take more start up time, which is ok as that is part of the show, building anticipation. This is not the case with the sportsman categories though. If you look at a brick home, most will call it a brick home but in fact it is a brick and mortar home. The bricks won't stand by themselves as the Pro categories can't stand by themselves. The pro categories need the sportsman categories to fill in the spaces between the pro shows. I have both Pro cars and Sportsman cars and understand the different dynamic. Having said that, if I was running a drag race show during a sportsman category I would stand on the opposite side of the track to the stands (bleachers) and watch the crowd and if their heads weren't swivelling back and forth like they were watching a tennis match I reckon they would be getting bored and a bored spectator is not a happy spectator. People have a short attention span. To ramp up the show I would want two cars staged up on the start line, two in the water ready to start the burn out and two running behind ready to pull into the water. As soon as the pair on the start line leave, next pair to start the burn out and by the time they are completed and rolling into stage the first pair are close to making the turn at the end. The show has to be faster.

Don't even get me started on oil downs. They are a show killer. Watch what happens to the spectators in the stands when the tractor comes out. Exodus. They have advertisements on television, because it is free, if you pay to go to a movie during the movie there are no advertisements. You wouldn't stand for it and neither will our paying spectators. How many racers work hard to get their new car ready for the Winternationals and they debut the new car there? Sadly too many. Why, because a high percentage of them have left a hose loose or didn't do up a rod bolt correctly or something of that ilk and the result is an oil damaged show. If I were running Willowbank I would expect a car and racer to have competed in at least three races prior to an event and even then they have to race with the understanding that if they put oil on the track... it will cost them, not in parts, but in cash. Sorry but that is the situation because the show is just too important. If you can't tighten your nuts, and crap falls off your car then you may need some test track time.

I have raced at 90 different race tracks in my life; Willowbank is just about the only race track that does not bring the competitor back in front of the crowd after the race. This is a huge design error as the slow parade in front of the grandstands of the race cars and drivers returning to the pits certainly are part of the show and allow the crowd to actually see the face of the racer and engage and interact with them. At Willowbank the racers disappear into the darkness and half of them are never seen again. A huge part of the show just never happens.

Track announcers are CRITICAL to the success of any good show. Most of the crowd needs to be told they are seeing something special. The world's best track announcer, Bret Kepner, worked with UDRA and on more than a few occasions when we won an event while towing back up the return road we got a standing ovation. I have won lots of races and only when Bret was announcing did we get that kind of response. That is crowd engagement and like SLAMFEST the UDRA series was a financial success, much of it for all the same reasons. I have never seen that interaction at Willowbank because you can't track is not built that way.

I have watched the Monster Trucks fill the grandstands with expensive tickets and they are doing entertainment stuff that fills the stadium and keeps the television royalties coming in as well. They crash on purpose. We can't do that.

NASCAR has been the world leader in successfully selling motorsport entertainment but even today they are struggling. The stories I have heard is that they have removed 40,000 seats from Daytona to insure the stands look full. I heard the reason was to install larger seats which sounds plausible as I do believe they were abusing their customers asking them to sit on an 18" wide seat for several hours during a race. I don't think you can afford to take your customers for granted and certainly can't abuse them.

Fifteen years ago at one of the old New Year's Series races at Willowbank I was sitting in the stands watching the race. It was as hot as the hinges of hell. I went up in the tower to ask Dennis Syrmis to come down and sit in the stands with me, he declined saying it was too hot. I pointed out to him if it was too hot for him I bet it is too hot for the spectators. I told him then a couple of steel poles and some shade cloth or shade sail would go a long way to improving the viewing conditions for our customers. Over the next several months I persisted with the idea and finally I was told it was too expensive that it would cost over \$250,000 to do this. Sceptically, I accepted this as it was not my job to run the race track. I raced for many years at Bowling Green Kentucky race track which had covered grandstands and the facility always had a crowd, even at small events. Nothing has changed and Bowling Green still packs them in. You can't abuse your regular customers.

Traveling and racing SLAMFEST with our Top Door Corvette we have taken the show from Tasmania to Darwin and just about every race track in between. The single overriding observation is that every race is packed with spectators. This is because at the smaller tracks when the show comes to town is much like when the carnival comes to town. You must go on that day, because it won't be there next week or next month, and may not come next year. Any salesman knows to close a deal the situation is usually to create a situation where the customer must do this now. SLAMFEST is just that. Many of the races have produced record breaking crowds. This is not a declining spectator situation.

Let's start with what I asked earlier, where do new racers come from? I know how I got started, or should I say when the "infection" began, because for me it is truly is a "disease", not that I have sought a cure. I am quite happy with my disease and the association of all my diseased friends. Many years ago I saw a sign on the back of a dragster trailer with a skull and crossbones on it with the instructions that this vehicle contains a disease for which there is no cure. As normal, the humour was the truth in the story.

I grew up at a time in history when for us the car was several things. It was freedom, an escape, a way to get out and interact with others of my age, be with my friends, it was social. For many of us it was a status symbol, a test bench, a tool that rewarded our egos with a sense of accomplishment.

Part of my concern is motor racing, car racing and drag racing in particular still relevant today. Does it do the same things it did forty years ago? I think maybe not.

It is common knowledge that life today is radically different than it was forty years ago. The internet has changed everything. The fact that I can write this and post it for all to see is testament to the reach of the internet.

Between Facebook, all the social network stuff and video games are we not all becoming a little isolated in our togetherness? Is today the car just a form of transportation where for many of us in the past it was an extension of our personalities?

I grew at a time when in the 1960's some race tracks would have qualified fields of 64 TOP FUEL cars.

I know why that was possible back then; it was because it was affordable. All racers ran what they could buy at the wrecking yards because that is where all the parts came from. There were very few aftermarket parts available other than the basics. Add to that clutch management was your left leg, the ignition systems of the day were marginal at best and if you can't light it you can't burn it. This means anyone could win. The first thing that happened was better tires, better tires obsoleted the front engine dragster, the rear engine dragster was perfected and then in 1977 Keith Black made the first aluminium block. At first it would appear having a block that was repairable was a good thing but it let racers "lean" on the parts harder, made the cars quicker finding more weak components which the aftermarket was happy to produce more robust replacements, and so the spiral goes. Each step gradually increasing the cost of going racing to the point where there could be less than 64 competing Top Fuel cars in the world.

I guess more to the point I have to ask is motor racing, and again drag racing in particular, still relevant to society today.

What is the spark that ignites the idea for someone to start racing? The second part of the unasked question is what keeps the racer coming back to the race track. If he is winning all the races, sure he will keep coming back but that just does not happen and even if someone is on a "streak of wins" it never lasts. What keeps a racer coming back year after year, decade after decade? Or what make them quit?

In my fifty years of drag racing I cannot count the number of people that have taken up the challenge of drag racing and raced for one race, one season or with just one car for a few years.

Why?

Most quit because of money or more precisely the lack of money. One must fully understand their budget limits, overreach and you will fail. One answer is that most new racers all enter the race "business" thinking that the biggest expense of time and money, is the initial construction and assembly of the

race car and getting the truck and trailer (or transport) organised. Sadly I must inform that this is not the case in most cases.

Some racers don't quit as much as they just park their cars. Officially they are still racers, with a race car, but they stopped taking it to the race track. There are often a few reasons for this, but the one that needs to be addressed here is, if the racer does not take their car to the track because of something the local race track is or is not doing. As mentioned earlier, no one actually races for money, if they did no one would race, because you always spend more money than you earn. Today, if you race you do so for – respect. Respect comes in different forms. Respect is taking home a bit more money than it cost to finish the day. If the amount you get for winning the days racing is substantially less than what it cost to get there on the day, that is no respect. OK if you lose first round you kind of expect that but if you win and lose money, well that is just no respect.

How important is the racer who loses first round? He is the hardest racer to keep coming back. Whatever incentive packages you have had better address this racer. The racer who wins a lot needs much less motivation to return and they both pay the same entry money and they both take the tree in first round. It is part of the show. Do you want four cars there or forty? If you take care of the back of the pack the front takes care of itself.

If the race track has no racers come through the gate, what kind of show do they have for their other customers? The question is rhetorical, because there is no show and they have no product or commodity to sell their customers (spectators).

A slowly diminishing show results in a dwindling spectator base. Sadly once you lose the spectators you have to work pretty hard to get them back again.

There are categories of race classes where once the car and tow rig is packaged the biggest cost is entry and fuel to get to the track. Often these are called sportsman or entry level categories, but often those categories are just a good place to race, because the ongoing costs are so minimal. It is a good place to practice your craft, the biggest challenge is that many have found this and often these categories are the most challenging to win in because it predominantly driving skill that wins the race and not a check book. I call it the ski boat factor. A good DY0 (Dial Your Own) dragster will cost about the same amount as a good ski boat and will be about as much maintenance. Actually the operating costs will be less because a ski boat uses heaps of fuel while most DY0 car can race all day on fifty dollars' worth of fuel. Less if you lose early.

Many racers choose a category to compete in because that category has a certain allure that appeals their sense of self-image. Nothing wrong with that, we all have to scratch our own personal itches.

In the “upper level” categories, if you want to call them that, as much as the car costs to build, and it can be substantial if you are going to compete at a national level you have to travel. Building the car is and expected expense what often blind sides new racers is the ongoing expenses. Travel costs can add up very quickly and then plug in the amount of time away from your income generating enterprise - work.

A rule of thumb I recommend to my clients is that there are three components to a successful situation.

A – The initial cost of the race car

B – The cost of infrastructure (truck, trailer and spare parts)

Generally speaking A and B will be about the same costs, within reason and practically.

C – The one component that is SELDOM considered is the change in lifestyle that a SUCCESSFUL adventure will require. In all the upper level categories it must be understood that a time investment component is mandatory. Either you will have to pay someone to work on the car or you will have to do it yourself and that means at least two nights a week in the shed doing race car maintenance. If you add infrastructure maintenance or infrastructure improvement that night shift work requirement expands.

I can vouch for this, having raced successfully in Top Alcohol Dragster winning three championships. For me it was a rare night that I did not work on the car until near midnight getting ready to go racing next. Either working on the car, or getting spares ready, or doing maintenance on the truck and trailer. I would race 28 races in 38 weeks and spend most of the winter getting ready for next season. I was lucky I had a wife that was as much a motor head as I was since the reason we started dating in the first place was, the car she drove, was a 1966 Impala SS with a 427 with a set of mag wheels, at first I thought it was her boyfriends, when I found out it was her car, I wanted to take her out on a date as that must be my kind of girl. It didn't hurt that she was pretty too. We were married 21 years before she passed.

Once, while I was tuner and crew chief on Danny Townsend's Funny Car, a new crewman commented to me that he wanted to save up his money to build a race car and go racing. I had to point out to him that it was NOT a pile of money that he needed but a stream of money. The pool of money needed to be replenished at a rate that at least as quick as the drained.

The one nugget of advice I give a lot of clients is to pick your destination before you pick your journey, you will save a LOT of money by taking a direct route to your destination.

Henry Ford once said 'Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you are probably right'.

When I had my workshop in Cincinnati, Denny Fallon and his brother had a shop across the road from me. I am the second owner of a neat, nearly stock 1965 Chevelle Malibu, 300HP 327 Powerglide, power steer, power brakes, I bought it off the lady that bought it new and only drove it for three years as her husband drove and she didn't and he died in 1968. Denny had a Chevy II of nearly the same vintage and condition. On nice spring days we both would get our special cars out of the garage and drive them to work.

One day Denny put a set of slicks on his Chevy II and took it to the drags. Over the next few years, the car got a six point cage, back half with four link, front half and

then a complete tube chassis. It became a panel car. It was a nice car but if a bit of planning took place he could have had a nice street Chevy II and a Chevy II race car as well and it would have been less money. I still have my Chevelle and Denny does not have his Chevy II. The final chapter of the story is that the next year he built a rear engine dragster. If he would have only had a plan he could have saved a lot of *time* and a lot of *money*. I really think he never really considered the rear engine dragster to begin with. Why?

During my university days I took a Philosophy course. The final exam room had about 250 people in there; I was about in the middle of the room. The professor walked in and walked to the black board and wrote the exam question on the black board. The question was "Why?" I thought for a few moments and began writing my answer. Shortly after, I noticed on student near the front of the class rose and turned in his paper after a few moments. I continued to write, I wrote five pages on WHY. Talk about expanding the bull shit!! Finally after nearly forty five minutes I turned in my paper along with many others who were finishing as well. I got a "C". Only one person got an "A" out of the class, he was the first to turn in his paper. His paper said "Why Not?". For me the exam itself was a learning experience, not just a test. Life is like that. Cut away the bullshit and find the core answer.

In closing I cannot stress how important it is to insure that Drag Racing does not abuse our customers. We have to have a snappy and clean show and keep our customers comfortable, entertained and do it at a price they can afford.

Is it more complicated than that?