

Letters, fares and own-goals

by BROCK WEIR

A few days ago, I attended an event that involved emergency personnel.

These occasions are always a great opportunity to express appreciation for the persons who tirelessly give of themselves day in and day out to make our communities better ? and safer ? places to live, work, and play.

In this job, I also enjoy seeing the wonder on the faces of kids when they have the chance to get up close and personal with a person in uniform, the vehicle they use to get to the point of emergency or interest, and the equipment that allows them to rise to the occasion on behalf of us all.

Do these occasions sow the seeds for future police officers, fire fighters, paramedics or other emergency personnel? Maybe ? only time will tell, but it certainly doesn't hurt.

Instances like these often remind me of my youngest cousin.

Six years separate us, so when we were growing up, in retrospect, I must have thought I was the proverbial ?big man on campus.? Although the age difference matters little now, there was enough of a gap there that I could exercise a bit of adult-level snarkiness about some of her youthful ideas.

I don't know if she ever had a chance in her earliest days to visit a fire station, but I remember her boldly proclaiming one day, when the well-worn question of what we both wanted to be when we grew up bubbled to the surface, that her goal was to be a ?fire truck or a cow thing.?

Not a firefighter, mind you, but the truck itself.

Not a cowgirl, cowboy, or cow-person, of course; but a mysterious ? and potentially ominous-sounding ? ?cow thing.?

As far as I know, some thirty-odd years later, she hasn't yet hit the wild, wild, west, become a ranch hand, secured a job at an abattoir, or pursued a career at her nearest meat counter. Nor has she tapped Tony Stark to see what he could do to make her fire truck dreams come true. But the intentions were good, despite by juvenile and precocious eyerolls.

Truth be told, I was in no position to roll. My goals at that age were only slightly more grounded. For reasons that escape me, around that particular time I loved the idea of working in a gas station ? that is, one of those basic gas stations from the 1980s and 90s that pumped fuel, had a tiny kiosk of the most basic of convenience items, and ? and maybe this is why I thought the job was particularly glamorous ? dispensed all manner of prizes to young customers. If memory serves, they offered everything from fairy tale and wildlife books penned by Dr. Jane Goodall to flimsy drinking glasses promoting everything from the Michael Keaton ?Batman? movies to flavours of the month that came out of what was then the World Wrestling Federation.

Perhaps placing second in my employment stakes at that time was anything to do with Canada Post. I loved the idea of being on the committee that selects stamp designs and being part of the creative process, but, truth be told, I would have picked any job in their hierarchy. I just thought it was cool, and for that I solely attribute my philatelist grandfather.

Those dreams were short-lived, but I still felt a bit of a pang last week when Canada Post's latest forecast was published.

According to a report from The Canadian Press published on Friday, 2023 wasn't Canada Post's most successful year, to put it mildly, posting a loss of \$748 million before taxes. It was, they said, their ?second-worst year on record.?

Among the reasons cited for this loss were less traditional letter mail going around, and courier companies nibbling into the parcel business.

Some of the possible methods the Crown Corporation might explore to help right the ship are higher stamp prices to send a letter; employee layoffs, and even, per the federal government, easing up legislation to potentially allow for delivery a few times a week rather than all five weekdays.

Personally, when COVID-19 came knocking and so many of us were unable to get out and shop for the non-essentials, I thought this would be a boon for Canada Post as more and more people were getting what they needed online ? after all, it had to be delivered somehow. Courier services saw a bump, certainly, in the volume they were hauling, but it seems Canada Post somehow missed the mailboat on this.

Maybe it's just me, but I fail to see how raising prices on the cost to send an envelope, reducing existing services, or laying off individuals who are ultimately tasked with delivering the product would help in any significant way. Making things more difficult and costly for customers has never, in my experience, been a sure-fire way to have patrons proverbially beating down your door to fork over their dough.

If people are interested in sending a letter or parcel at the moment, hiking up the rates sure isn't going to entice people.

It might sound counterintuitive on the surface, but wouldn't it be smarter in the long run to lower the cost to send a letter, a parcel or take advantage of the myriad other services provided by Canada Post to incentivize people to take a second look at the organization that was a ubiquitous part of our lives? Or, at the very least, position themselves as an alternative to courier services?

The same could also be said for our transit providers.

In York Region, for instance, we hear year in and year out that in many cases ridership is on the decline and, as a consequence, so are revenues. Finding efficiencies is always the name of the game when it comes to publicly-funded services, but raising fares for potential customers who might find existing fares already out of reach for use on a regular basis seems like an own-goal.

Take, for example, Orangeville's method of transit delivery. Over the last couple of years, the Town has eliminated transit fares and is currently providing it as a free service to residents.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the system has seen a surge in use ? in February, they reported ridership was up 102 per cent.

Now, of course, this does create a financial burden on the municipality as they are not collecting fares to help with the cost of fuel and regular maintenance, but with ridership seeing such a surge, even a nominal fee shouldered by this new surge in patrons would surely narrow the gap.

When times get tough for customer-driven services, thoughts should turn to enticing people back rather than driving them away.

Unfortunately for Canada Post and transit providers the country-over, offering books on chimps, wildebeests, baboons, zebras, elephants, hyena, giraffes, and lions, no matter Dr. Goodall's talents, or dinner wear featuring the unappetizing image of The Penguin, as depicted by Danny DeVito in *Batman Returns*, won't do the trick.

But it might help be a balm for sticker shock at the pumps!