

SCREENS COIN THE

Maiden has 80 years' experience of putting up posters. Last September it signed a contract with Network Rail that is expected to generate £450m from 2,000 poster sites at 17 mainline stations across the UK. But that's only part of the story. Maiden's ROGER FERNLEY tells Tony Laycock how station advertising has gone techno

Roger Fernley, Maiden's managing director (Transport), is the man responsible for a contract that was not only renewed against stiff competition but was also extended by three years, demonstrating Network Rail's confidence in the company's ability to maintain its momentum and technological lead in this specialised sector of the advertising market.

And that is not all, as Fernley points out: 'Network Rail is our biggest contract in terms of value but we have also been very successful with the train operating companies. At the present time we have renewed 77 per cent of our rail business with them, with about 16 per cent still to come to the market.'

Explaining how the contracts work, Fernley says: 'The £477 million is the total revenue value, the top-line revenue we plan to bring in over the period of the contracts. In effect, we manage the sites and get a commission and pass back to Network Rail, or indeed to the train operating companies, a revenue share and an underwritten level of rent guarantee. Network Rail, South Eastern Trains, Go Ahead and National Express have renewed their contracts with us, making up that 77 per cent of business we have regained. We offer them new development ideas, proposals to put in new signs and sites at their stations, as well as to develop new lines of revenue. We design, seek planning consent, build and install and then go out to sell those sites on the advertising market.'

Fernley joined Maiden when the company took over British Transport Advertising, where

On a screen near you: Transvision has transformed station advertising in just three years.



he was managing director. He understands the business intimately having built up a wealth of experience over many years in the sector. He was with London Transport for more than 20 years, eventually becoming MD of London Transport Advertising.

It's a sector obviously benefiting from huge advances in technology. Unless you have been passing through London's mainline termini with your eyes shut, you can hardly have failed to notice the huge changes that technology has brought to this well established form of advertising.

First launched just three years ago, Transvision is transforming the advertising environment on the large mainline stations across the rail network, bringing BBC News 24 live to station users. 'This is really vanguard stuff, world-beating and

recognised as such by technology experts everywhere and adds a new perspective to station advertising,' says Fernley.

It has proved a big hit with both rail travellers and advertisers, providing the solution to what Maiden's advertisers have been seeking for some time. Fernley says: 'Apart from technological developments, we knew the time would arrive when our customers would want to be much more interactive with their audience, to shorten the time between seeing an advertisement and people being able to buy the product advertised. Advertisers linked up to the BBC on Transvision see it as a completely unique opportunity to advertise alongside the BBC. They find it's the perfect attention grabber. It's a 'real time' experience and also means advertisers are able to update their advertisements from the end of

SILVER FOR MAIDEN



a computer line, making the ads controllable, changeable and amendable. We have 10 Transvision units sited at Waterloo, Victoria, Liverpool Street and Manchester Piccadilly, where they are proving a massive success. An enormous proportion of our business now comes from the Transvision units.'

It was, says Fernley, a picture of Railtrack's then chairman Bob Horton standing by a model of the refurbished Paddington Station that fired the ambition to bring outdoor advertising into the 21st century. 'There was no advertising whatsoever in that model. If I was still going to be charged with generating advertising revenue back to the railway, I had to find ways of upgrading the presentation of sites and finding devices that carried more than one advertiser because I knew Bob Horton was not going to let me nail plywood

and paper to his brand new shiny station!'

Meeting the challenge head-on, Fernley launched a major research and development programme. 'We looked all over, using experts in the field and seeking their advice, finding out what was going on and what technology was becoming available, exploring all avenues and setting up pilot schemes in a number of stations including Victoria, where we experimented with back and front projection. The difficulty with the station environment is that the ambient illumination levels are quite high. In the end, we decided the best technology for sometime into the future was going to be LED. Our difficulty with LED at the time was that it was simply too bright. You could see it from a mile away but from just 50 meters on a station concourse, like Waterloo and Victoria, it was too bright. We had

'Network Rail is our biggest contract in terms of value but we have also been very successful with the train operating companies'

to do a lot of work to get the brightness down to a manageable level, which took about three years. We launched Transvision at Waterloo and the market took to it like ducks to water. In three years we had come from the steam age into the modern electronic era!'

Railway stations, he says, are just about the perfect environment for Transvision. 'On stations we have a captive audience. The attention is captured by news presentation. People want to know what the headlines are and as they pass through they glance up and see the advertisements. People like that connection.'

However, any reports of the death of the traditional paper poster would be premature. 'We operate something like 30,000 advertising panels across the UK in all our formats,' says Fernley. 'We are ranked number one in terms of large formats on roadside and are effective leaders in shopping malls as well as the rail business. You are not going to turn 30,000 panels electronic overnight. It's "horses for courses" and we want to keep the scarcity value in Transvision. It was rolled out prudently, making sure we were building a market demand, not simply thinking that, because a number of advertisers were very keen, it represented a depth of opinion. Over the years there have been so many white elephants, things that seemed a great idea at the time but faded away after a year. The investment levels were so high we couldn't afford that to happen, neither could we afford to let down a major client like Network Rail. Transvision had to be rolled out carefully so as not to become commonplace. There is nothing wrong with a freshly posted 'four-sheet' poster – it does its job, telling you to go and buy a pint of Guinness! Nevertheless, in 10 years time I don't expect there will be much "bucket 'n' brush" work, either on rail or roadside. But neither do I expect it all to be electronically driven.'

Three years into Transvision, Fernley can't see a better idea coming along for the next five years. After that, he says, 'we could be into digital transmission, getting ads into a public environment like a ring circuit in your house and be able to pump messages out from a keyboard when and where you want.'