

Q&A with N-Scale Enthusiast's George Johnsen about the NSE / TroveStar Classifieds

(This interview ran in the November/December 2017 issue of N-TRAK Newsletter and TroveStar has been given permission to feature it on their website.)

A few months ago, the N-TRAK Newsletter heard about a new marketplace for n-scale items called the N Scale Enthusiast (NSE) / TroveStar Classifieds. To learn more about this, we reached out (via a phone interview) to George Johnsen, chairman of the NSE and got the scoop on this new venture.



George Johnsen
Chairman of the NSE

N-TRAK Newsletter: George thanks for taking the time away from your day job to chat with me today. Please, tell me about this new marketplace we have been hearing about.

George Johnsen: Bruce, as a long-time Ntrakker, it's great to talk to you, and thanks for everything Ntrak has done and continues to do to promote our hobby. I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you and your readers about the Classifieds. We are very excited about this new benefit, and we want to let all fellow n-scalers know about it.

The NSE / TroveStar Classifieds is a peer-to-peer, fixed-price marketplace for n-scale folks who want to buy and / or sell locos, rolling stock or accessories.

A big part of this hobby is acquiring trains. I would say the average NSE member has roughly 500 or more trains scattered about in his or her train room, basement or garage. Heck, my trains have even taken over my office!

N-scalers not only want to buy trains but they also want to cull items from their inventory. They might need funds to buy must-have new releases, or they just have too many of a particular car or loco type. It is also not uncommon for n-scalers to change the focus of what they are modeling – diesel to steam, Florida East Coast to Union Pacific, Colorado to Maine.

Sometimes, in this time of limited runs and preorders, hobbyists might miss something that was released that they REALLY needed in order to complete a consist or a scene. One way to get this must-have item is to grab it on the secondary market from someone else that bought it and now finds it to be surplus to their modeling goals.

So, n-scalers want to rotate their inventory and the Classifieds is a new and easy way for them to connect with one another to do just that.

Collaborative Effort

As you can gather from the name, the NSE / TroveStar Classifieds is a collaboration between two organizations devoted to supporting and growing n-scale model railroading. For the past 27 years, my colleagues and I at the NSE (through our annual national conventions and our magazine) have worked towards our organization's mission: preserve the history of n-scale model railroading and the railroads they represent. The N-Scale Model Train Database on TroveStar is a newer, younger entity that's been

busy since 2015 also promoting this great hobby. George Michaels, the founder of TroveStar and a fellow Ntrakker, has built (with the help of contributors) a searchable, on-line database that lists (at last count close to 46,000) n-scale engines, rolling stock, structures and accessories.

Newsletter: How did this effort come about?

GJ: Mr. Michaels approached me at the 2016 National NSE Convention in Kansas City with a very attractive idea of how to help support and expand the n-scale community, something the NSE is all the time trying to do. He proposed creating and hosting an on-line marketplace for n-scale items. But what would make this marketplace different and unique was the ease with which folks could list items for sale using functionality we refer to as “one-click listing.” What that means is sellers can list an item by simply using the reference data, descriptions and images from an existing database item on TroveStar. Of course you can add your own as well, but this simple option exists to make it really easy for those who aren’t camera savvy and hate to write.

We had been interested in building a marketplace for the NSE membership but the cost was prohibitive. So it was a no-brainer to tap into and leverage all the data already in the TroveStar database, which by the way grows every day. This was a perfect fit with our goals.

Newsletter: Okay, how does selling work?

GJ: Many of us n-scalers are very interested in selling some of our trains. Almost all of us have extra inventory in our train accumulation or we want to change up the cars we run from say Northeast boxcars to tank cars. But, let’s face it. We are all busy. Taking the time to find all the information necessary (manufacturer, road name, road number and release date) to list an item on an e-commerce site can be time consuming and well just too difficult for some of our less computer-savvy n-scalers. Searching the Internet for reference data can be a hassle, lead to inaccurate data, or is just too daunting for some. Add the task of taking a good-quality photograph of the item or even locating one on-line to ‘borrow,’ and this whole process can quickly put the kibosh on the idea of listing an item for sale.

Each and every one of our members can avoid all of these headaches because of the Classifieds. Every NSE member (as part of their annual dues) now gets the exclusive right to 25 listings on the Classifieds (they can optionally buy more listings at a much lower price than eBay). Unlike eBay, which can be hard to use and expensive, the Classifieds makes it possible to list an item for sale in literally minutes by using the pre-existing data featured in TroveStar, which has an extensive library of everyday items (complete with photographs and descriptions). Important reference data will auto-populate and sellers need only provide a price and short description of the items and packaging condition.

Newsletter: What if an item does not exist in the database?

GJ: There is a pretty good chance that most of what you want to sell is already documented. For items not yet in TroveStar, sellers have two choices. First, they can create the new item themselves. Second, they can list an item for sale as a “New Discovery” and the TroveStar curators will morph their photo and description into a new item.

Newsletter: Why limit sellers to NSE members?

GJ: We value our members and are always trying to offer new and different membership benefits to keep them coming back. Also, NSE members are devoted to this hobby and they know their engines; they know their boxcars and they know their hoppers. By offering NSE members the exclusive right to list items for sale on the Classifieds, we believe we are creating a quality marketplace of informed sellers and buyers.

Newsletter: Who can buy items?

GJ: Anyone, absolutely, anyone can purchase items from the Classifieds. And since this is a fixed-price marketplace, buyers can avoid the challenges of online auctions. TroveStar hosts the Classifieds and buyers just have to register (for free) with TroveStar.

Newsletter: Why offer the Classifieds if the NSE already runs an Auction and has print Classifieds Ads?

GJ: Good question. For some time now, we have been hosting Auctions and Classifieds Ads, something our members value. But our Auctions are meant for hard-to-find items and we have a huge backlog of items. We thought a logical component to the Auctions and Classifieds Ads would be an on-line peer-to-peer marketplace for the everyday items folks are looking for. We see this as a way to enhance our print Classified Ads and a way to help bring back some of the old-fashioned 'hunt and discover' energy historically found (but sadly disappearing) at swap meets and train shows. Our members are very important to us and a number of them have expressed the need to 'rotate' their equipment.

Newsletter: How many items are listed for sale? How many sellers?

GJ: We are still in the early days, but it looks very promising for growth. Right now there are over 600 items for sale from a variety sellers.

Newsletter: How many transactions have occurred since the launch?

GJ: We soft launched in July and so far, over two dozen purchases have been made.

Newsletter: Have you seen a jump in membership since the launch?

GJ: Yes, I am happy to report that more n-scalers have joined the NSE in recent months.

Newsletter: I know it's early days yet, but what are your thoughts on the future of the Classifieds?

GJ: Yes, this is a fledging marketplace and since it's a new venture, we welcome any constructive feedback from our members and any buyers.

We are very optimistic about the Classifieds. The prospects for this are really great. Just think about it. If each one of our 1,900 members listed just five, say, rolling stock, that would create a strong n-scale marketplace of 9,500 items, which would be great for all of us. It would also enhance the TroveStar database, making it an even richer resource.

I sincerely hope that after reading this interview, all of your NTRAK members will visit

ntrains.trovestar.com.