

The People Are the Power

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You are all well aware that your library depends upon community support for its very existence or you wouldn't be here. You know that the people are the power, and you want to develop more effective means of tapping that resource for the development of your library. But before we talk about how to do that, about public relations, marketing publicity or any of the skills and techniques you'll learn during this workshop, let's talk about you.

_____ When someone asks you what you do, do you say proudly "I am a librarian," or do you mumble something about working for the city in a middle management position dealing with information?

_____ Do you have a plan for your future in the profession or do you secretly want to open a bookstore?

_____ If you're cornered in a "Proposition 13 type discussion" (i.e. people who want libraries should pay for them), do you get angry and stomp away, or do you have some good answers for your antagonist?

_____ If someone comes to you with a new idea, do you immediately think of all the reasons why it won't work, or do you say "Let's try it."

_____ If you went to work tomorrow and found the library building was gone, but all its contents remained, would you know what to do with all the books, records, films etc.? Would you know who in the community would want the collection?

_____ Are you so unhappy about being underpaid that you've vowed not to do one extra thing?

_____ Do you secretly agree with the prognosticators who say the library is an obsolete institution that will be replaced by new technology?

_____ Do you dream up lots of new ideas and then leave them in the dream and talk stage?

_____ Do you think library outreach programs are social work—not a librarian's responsibility?

_____ Do you think most of the efforts to promote library science are trite and trashy; lacking the dignity that you and your profession deserve?

_____ Do you read professional literature, contribute to it and participate in professional organizations? —Or do you think it's all too hopelessly boring?

These questions, and many more we could ask each other, are directed toward a point that should, by now, be very obvious. Your ability to communicate effectively with your publics depends upon you and your attitude about yourself and your work. Or to borrow from Albert Camus who said something like:

"Try to please everyone, you please no one.
Please yourself, you please most people."

You should know that you are a valued member of a well respected, challenging, and yes, even exciting profession with the potential for serving everyone, since people don't have to be old, ill, on welfare, or in trouble to use the library. And I should know that I'm preaching to the converted, end the sermon and move on to public relations.

Public relations as a professional skill is a 20th century development, the outgrowth of mass communication, mass marketing and the coupling of both to stimulate action.

There are as many definitions of public relations as there are opinions about its stature as a profession and the validity of its role in marketing everything from political candidates to library services. Simply defined, public relations involves a planned and sustained effort to establish mutual understanding between an organization and its public.

It is ironic that public relations has an image problem and is so frequently misunderstood. The term public relations is often used interchangeably with publicity, which is just one of its tools. It is seen by some as little more than a nice attitude, smile and "have a good day" that create friendly relations. There is also a tinge of suspicion and distrust that may be associated with aggressive press agency that specializes in stunts and puffery. Yet in spite of these misconceptions, public relations has become a powerful and indispensable tool of management. And practitioners insist that they do not create images. A good reputation must be earned.

A public relations program may include marketing, merchandising, press agency, promotion, publicity, public affairs and even advertising. A good program is rarely just one of them. Public relations is notably different from advertising alone which uses paid space and time while public relations depends on free editorial space and news or public service time.

Public relations was "invented" in the early 20th century when big business was forced to abandon its "public be damned" attitude. The muckrakers were fighting corruption in business and government and the public was reading, listening and demanding reform. Ida M. Tarbell exposed the antisocial actions of Standard Oil in her history of the company, and Upton Sinclair unmasked the horrors of the meatpacking industry in *The Jungle*. In response to such attacks, business produced a whitewash of words, one sided communication and little action.

Then pr pioneer Ivy Lee came along as an advisor to big business, who firmly believed in information for the public. He ended the Pennsylvania Railroad's policy of secrecy by inviting reporters to the scene of a train wreck to see for themselves exactly what happened. He even provided background information for their stories. His frankness generated "good press."

Another public relations pioneer, Edward L. Bernays, wrote the first book on the subject, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, in 1922. He also developed the theory of specialized publics, stressing that messages should be targeted to a specific audience.

Although public relations was not defined in standard dictionaries until 1946, it has since become part of our everyday vocabulary, and is an accepted management function. Few business or government organizations are without a public relations department and two of the largest public relations firms employ over 600 and have annual billings in excess of \$22,000,000. While most practitioners entered the field through training or experience as journalists, there are currently over 300 colleges offering one or more courses in public relations.

How have libraries made use of the philosophy and technique of public relations? Vigorously but inconsistently.

As early as 1910, John Cotton Dana horrified some of his more staid library colleagues by using a billboard to advertise the library. He developed his libraries in Denver, Springfield, Massachusetts; and Newark in terms of identified local interests, and he believed in telling the community what the library had and did. A major section of his practical guide, "Modern American Library Economy as Illustrated by the Newark, N.J. Free Public Library" was devoted to advertising. And Dana's notion of advertising is so close to our contemporary practice of public relations, that his outspoken treatise is still a useful tool. He said:

Nothing is better for a public institution than publicity. The people who pay for its support are entitled to know—it is part of their education to know,—all its ins and outs, its receipts, its expenditures, its methods, its plans and ambitions. Newspapers are almost invariably willing to print notes of these things. They feel that about the management of a public library there should not be, toward the public, the slightest intimation of a desire for secrecy.¹

His guide outlines numerous ways a library can involve its community and communicate effectively, from stories for the newspaper to working with local schools.

Dana said that he came to his library everyday with pleasure and left it with regret. His enthusiasm was contagious and his tradition of public relations has been continued in the annual John Cotton Dana Library Public Relations Awards presented since 1946 by ALA and the H. W. Wilson Company.

Yet in spite of the early and enthusiastic interest in public relations, librarians are uneasy about pr and are still debating its merits. A 1974 *Library Journal* editorial is a classic teapot tempest protesting "The Selling of the Library." The editor objects to aggressive pr messages because he believes that people need and will use the public library just as they use hospitals, schools and other essential services.

This commercial pap, when applied to an institution like the public library, may be effective to a degree, if we want to pack 'em in, but beyond its lack of dignity, it overlooks the basic justification for all public services—that people need them. No other essential public service finds it necessary to peddle its wares as if they were new appliances for a consumer public that is tired of washing dishes, preparing food from scratch, or having hair with split ends.²

The editorial inspired a flurry of letters and articles on both sides of the issue. As recently as the September 1st, 1979, issue, John Berry made the same protest. His target is now marketing because he fears use of the term suggests that libraries will have to charge for their services. Nonsense!

Should libraries use "business" skills such as marketing and public relations? Absolutely! A business produces goods and services and its bottom line is profit. A nonprofit organization, such as the library, provides services and its bottom line is "quality of life," which is much more difficult to measure than dollars and cents. It is dangerous for a library to assume that the quality of the cause will generate public support. Many organizations with this attitude fail to develop a clear statement of their service, and fail to develop marketing plans and delivery systems for the service.

The questions should not be whether public relations is appropriate to libraries, but rather how every public, school, academic and special library can best use the techniques and skills of pr to assure that its services are well defined, understood, used and supported.

According to most public relations specialists, there are four basic steps involved in the public relations process.

1. Research
2. Planning
3. Communication
4. Evaluation

These are steps in a process that can be applied to any type and size of library. They are a function of good management.

RESEARCH involves identifying the library's publics and their attitudes towards the library. These "publics" may include the staff, governing board, volunteer or friends group, users, and nonusers, and booksellers or other suppliers.

Research should begin inside the library. . . . How do the staff and trustees view the library? How well do they understand its goals and policies? What do they see as its major strengths and weaknesses? How do they feel about their relationship with the library and its administration? The evaluation of the library should also include an objective view of its physical appearance, from the cold realities of access, signage, and lighting, to the warmer considerations of welcoming comfort and good cheer.

Beyond the library, research involves gathering all available demographic information about the community; age, income, ethnic background, occupations, religions, interests, community groups and whatever formal or informal data is available. Original research should also be undertaken to find out what people think of the library and what their information needs are. Librarians have used numerous survey techniques to gather this information from mail questionnaires and telephone surveys of scientifically drawn population samples to personal contact and input from clubs, churches and other local institutions. The goal is constant sensitivity to public opinion.

The PLANNING stage in the pr process should make the communications effort an integral part of the total library program. There should be a written pr plan with short and long range goals, a clear idea of the scientific "publics" to be reached, a timetable and reporting schedule, lists of resources such as printing facilities, artists, volunteers, etc., staffing plan, and a budget. Although most libraries are not in a position to afford the large public relations staff employed by major businesses, public relations does require special expertise, and it cannot be done for "pennies" as the title of a recent book on library pr would suggest.

Percentages of the total library budget have been suggested to guide administrators on the cost of pr. The suggested percentages range from 1-10%, and have little significance. Building a specific plan with a budget is a much more logical and convincing way to justify investment in a public relations program.

The COMMUNICATION phase of the public relations process is the outreach, programming and publicity that the research and planning have prepared for. The possibilities are great, as is attested by the success stories reported by libraries in the trade journals.

One of the first steps toward communication for the library is building a media or press list for all available publications and broadcast channels including daily and weekly newspapers, radio and television stations, community group newsletters, school newspapers and any other media that may reach the particular target audience. Personal contact with the people on the press list is especially important. It pays to explain the library's plan to the media, ask for their help, be aware of their deadlines, read their columns, be familiar with their broadcast format. The Federal Communications Commission requires that radio and television stations broadcast information in the interest of the local community in order to retain their license. Libraries are eligible for free "public service time," but must compete with numerous other community agencies and good causes. Personal contact with radio and television personnel is essential to getting the library message aired.

Beyond mass media, there are many other publicity tools that are regularly used by libraries including newsletters (internal and external), annual reports, posters, booklists and bibliographies, displays, special programs, audio visual presentations, speakers bureaus, and more. The Plainedge Public Library (Massapequa, NY) prepares special newsletters for expectant parents, senior citizens, as well as its regular newsletter bulk mailed periodically to every household. The library also has a written public relations policy approved by its board of directors. —Several Portland, Oregon, school libraries act as career centers for teenagers. Once a month the library features a career display. Parents are invited to come to the library and share their occupations with teens. —The University of Texas at Austin wrote about the opening of a new library in the football program. —"Black History," a radio show, airs twice a week from the Dallas Public Library. —The Clark County, Nevada, Library sponsors a "Traveling Artist Series." An artist travels over the state in a mobile library demonstrating his or her work for a two week period. Ingenuity abounds.

The final step of the pr process, EVALUATION, requires that the public relations staff determine whether the communication program meets its stated objectives. One objective may have been media coverage and a tally on how often radio and television stations carried the library

message along with a description of their audience is proof of achievement. Other means to evaluate a specific aspect of the pr program might include clips of newspaper coverage and information on the size of each paper's circulation; use of evaluation forms at programs; or surveys in the library to determine how people found out about various services. It may be difficult to prove a direct cause and effect between a communications program and increased library usage, but an attempt should be made to measure the impact of the public relations investment. A library thumb should be stationed on the pulse of public opinion.

In addition to the public relations programs of individual libraries, there is a growing national effort to increase citizen use and support of libraries. In 1958, National Library Week (NLW) was initiated by publishers and librarians, and remains the first and only national promotion program to increase use and support of libraries. The NLW program mobilized prominent citizens and librarians at the national and local levels to focus public and media attention on libraries. Workshops, handbooks, promotional materials, and national public relations support, have made NLW a means to inform the public about library services, as well as an important public relations teaching tool for the profession.

In 1975, the American Library Association's Public Information Office inherited responsibility for National Library Week. Although long recognized as the national voice for librarians, the ALA had not previously been active in generating national media coverage. Yet both need and media interest were great, and the first full-fledged ALA effort—the 1975 NLW campaign—was awarded the Silver Anvil by the Public Relations Society of America and the Golden Triumph by the Chicago Publicity Club.

Since 1975, the ALA has continued to produce posters and other graphic materials that generate an income for support of a year-round public relations effort that involves placing radio and television public service announcements with the networks, feature stories and print public service ads in national magazines, wire service stories and other national publicity. In 1976, ALA also began producing a weekly syndicated book review column that is distributed by Newspaper Enterprise Association to its over 700 subscribing newspapers nationwide. Attached to each column is a survey of "What Americans Are Reading" compiled from tabulations of most requested books submitted by 150 participating libraries.

In 1978, the ALA Public Information Office generated news headlines by releasing results of a Gallup organization study of attitudes toward libraries and reading. The study was sponsored by a special grant from Baker & Taylor, and was planned to gather data on how Americans perceive libraries for the delegates participating in the White House Conference on Library and Information Services. Among many findings; in spite of the fact that 51% of the American public has used the library in the past year, about one-fifth of the 1,515 respondents have no idea where the funding for the library comes from, and an additional 39% incorrectly stated the principal source of library funding.

The ALA's National Library Week Committee also administers the \$1,000 annual Grolier National Library Week Grant awarded to the state library association presenting the best proposal for a public relations program.

The Public Relations Section of the ALA's Administration and Management Association provides further national leadership in public relations. The 1200 member section involves pr specialists from libraries across the country who work together to produce active and effective continuing education programs, workshops, and publications. Their annual "PR Swap and Shop" has become one of the most well attended ALA programs and offers librarians a chance to sample promotional materials from libraries across the country and get one-to-one counseling on pr matters from the experts. The Public Relations Section is also the national home for the Friends of the Library groups, and administers the coveted John Cotton Dana Library Public Relations Awards.

Citizen support of libraries is the concern of another national group. The National Citizens Emergency Committee To Save Our Public Libraries. The independent committee was founded in 1976 by Whitney North Seymour, Jr., an attorney and former New York Public Library trustee. In the fall of 1978, the Citizens Committee launched a nationwide campaign to enlist grass roots support for library funding. Seymour admits that some Friends groups are already waging successful local campaigns, but he adds "Many Friends are better cake-bakers than legislative arm-twisters."

And at the grass roots, thousands of citizens delegates participating in the state pre-White House Conferences have asked libraries to do a better job of informing the public of their services. Public relations is very likely to be a focus of the White House Conferences next month.

How will librarians be prepared to meet the growing demands for pr programs? This fine pre-conference is one of a growing number of state and regional programs designed to help us acquire the skills to do a better job of communication. But we also need to allocate more of our precious, shrinking resources to professional public relations counsel. I believe that every library system should offer public relations services to member libraries. If you don't currently receive such service, why not ask for it. The time is right.

There is also great need for a much stronger national campaign, and I fear we are about to get

hung up on deciding who's going to do it. One unified effort of all existing resources will have more mass media mileage than the National Citizen's Emergency Committee doing something, the National Commission doing something, and ALA continuing to struggle along with our something. I believe that we have proven our ability to lead the way, but our financial resources are incredibly limited. We need your support. We need you, as ALA members (or potential members), to make the public relations program a major association priority.

Libraries will have a future as primary information resources, if librarians use public relations theories and techniques to find political allies and build positive public opinion. The people are the power.

Abraham Lincoln said it all, "With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed." Lee Brawner, Director of the Metropolitan System in Oklahoma City, said it again, "People are usually down on what they ain't up on!"

REFERENCES

1. Part 4, "Advertising", Elmtree Press, 1910.
2. John Berry, "The Selling of the Library." *Library Journal* v. 99, (January 15, 1974), p. 85.



NCLA Executive Board, 1979-81.