

PUBLICIZING INFORMATION AND REFERENCE SERVICES

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In the first chapter of Public Library Service, A Guide to Evaluation, with Minimum Standards, the services provided by the modern library are grouped into six divisions. Under the sixth and last division heading are these provisions: "Stimulation of use and interpretation of materials through publicity, display, reading lists, story hours, book talks, book and film discussion, and other appropriate means either in the library or in community organizations."¹

The idea of publicizing the library's policies and services, which includes all kinds of reference and informational services, is not new to anyone. All librarians attempt to tell the story of their library and its services in one way or another. But for some reason, or perhaps a great many reasons, they have failed to reach the general public. Too few people know what a library has to offer in the way of information and reference services, both to the individual and to the group.

The situation may have improved slightly since a survey about library use was made a few years ago, but it still has not improved enough. At that time, a large group of non-users were interviewed and asked why they did not make use of the public library. A small percentage indicated that they had so many interests or responsibilities that they did not have time to visit a library. Another group said they had patronized a library at some time or another but that inadequate equipment and book stock had caused them to become non-users. But 52 per cent of those interviewed said they know little or nothing about the library; that they never thought of seeking an answer at the library when they were faced with a specific problem, and finally, that the library ought to make known its location, holdings, services, and programs if it expected people to make use of them. In some instances, when groups and individuals were questioned about whom they would consult for information about a variety of subjects, the library appeared last on a list, if it appeared at all.

It seems unfortunate that libraries of all kinds have never

had the benefit of a good national publicity program. The cartoonists still picture librarians as men and women living in ivory towers hung with "quiet" signs and shushing small boys; when the motion picture world decides to turn its cameras on librarians the best they can do is portray a librarian that behaves in a hysterical, neurotic manner, and even Sergeant Bilko, when he introduces an Army librarian by way of this television series makes her appear not only dowdy but dumb. The teaching and nursing professions and even Smokey, the bear, have benefitted enormously by the fine work done by the Advertising Council, Inc. Through nation-wide, public service programs prepared by advertising specialists the citizenry has been urged to support their schools and hospitals and conservation programs. But no one has sold them on a campaign to use and support their libraries. Certainly, the Advertising Council, Inc. cannot be blamed for this oversight -- librarians can only blame themselves.

How can this situation be improved? How can the negative attitude of the public be changed? How can the public be made to think spontaneously of the library as a community center; as a clearinghouse for information of all kinds, as a place where they can obtain information and help when they need it? Certainly, librarians can not sit around and wait for someone else to do it--they have to do it themselves.

Before the various methods of publicizing the services of libraries even can be considered it must be realized that publicity is only one of the tools used in the promotion of public relations. Without good public relations, good publicity is impossible.

Public relations is not something to be talked about one day and forgotten about the next day. Public relations is something to be lived with year in and year out. It is a long-term function that evaluates public attitudes and needs; that forms policies and procedures identified with these attitudes and needs; that explains problems and policies to both staff and public, and develops programs and services that will earn public support and understanding.

Library public relations is essentially concerned with the library and the community it serves but it is also concerned with the interrelationships of the library's trustees, administration, staff, and the public. It deals with policies, resources, and services that affect any of them in any way. Without good internal relations, it is impossible to have good external relations.

Good communication is the first and most important factor

in creating good internal relations in a library, or in any organization, for that matter. The staff must be fully informed about library plans, problems, services, and holdings. Good communication makes all staff members feel a part of the whole and minimizes the possibility of competition between individual staff members or between departments. This, in turn, makes for satisfaction and enthusiasm for the job and a pride in work--in other words, good internal relations.

Publicity which is an integral part of this public relations definition is not a purpose but a tool that can be used to tell the story of the library or the reference and information services to the public. Publicity must be honest, accurate, and present a true picture of the library at all times. Properly used, it can result in increased public understanding, confidence, and good will.

The publicity family is a large one and includes advertising, magazines, films, radio, television, photographs, special programs, public speeches, exhibits, books, reports, posters, publications, special events, and meetings. Last, but certainly not least, is word-of-mouth publicity--that spreads like wildfire and may even make or break a library. A satisfied patron may tell a dozen people about the superb service she received at the library but a disgruntled person can negate all the good will by being even more vocal--he may even have a vital say--so in whether the library gets a new building, a reference book collection, or a raise in salaries for its staff.

To begin a program to publicize reference and information services, a list of group agencies in the community should be made. This list should include welfare, government, social, economic, educational, political, and religious organizations of all kinds and sizes. A file of "specialists" in the community--people who know a great deal about any subject from atomic power to xylophones--should be compiled also. An alphabetical file for easy reference use should list the name of the group or organization, purpose, activities, number of members, meeting time, publication and publication deadline, agencies with which the group cooperates, outstanding leaders, and any other pertinent information. The specialist file could be arranged alphabetically by subject and by the name of the individual.

These files should be invaluable, not only for publicizing the services, but also for a record of community interests and activities. If staff time does not permit the compilation of such files, the aid of the "Friends of the Library" or an interested, competent volunteer may be solicited. Perhaps, in the increasing efforts to extend cooperation, some of the examples set by

hospitals, welfare agencies, and schools to make use of people with time and talent could be followed.

Library service to groups is one way of reaching individuals economically and effectively. Copies of folders, reports, announcements, and special programs should be sent to all groups. If they have a publication they should be asked to include announcements about the library in this medium. In return the librarian can invite groups and organizations to send notices of their own meetings; invite the schools to supply notices of public interest that are usually sent home to parents and the radio and television stations to keep you informed of interesting cultural and educational programs. The librarian may find it advantageous to invite groups to visit his library on some specific evening. Then he can explain the reference and information services and make clear what the library has to offer to both individuals and groups. It has been said, at many times and in many ways, that the lack of information about a library's service and position in the community has often resulted in poor support and negligible attention. Working and cooperating with all groups is one of the best ways to put an end to such an unhappy situation.

After group work, the librarian should turn his attention to the newspapers, one of the most important publicity media at the library's disposal. Most American adults read at least one newspaper a day. Surveys have shown more men read the sport, editorial, and financial pages while more women read the women's pages and the columns. But the important thing is that both men and women read some part of some paper every day.

Newspaper editors welcome good materials at all times. Space is limited in any newspaper and it is the job of the editor to select and print only those items that have real news value. He is under no obligation to print articles without real news or feature value even if it has been submitted by a deserving private or public institution. No matter what the size of his newspaper--big city daily or small county weekly--an editor is interested in news that will appeal to his readers. These readers want to know what is going on and how it affects them, their family, their business, and any other interests they may have.

Anyone can learn to write a good news release with the help of books that are to be found in every library. It is not necessary to have a major in journalism to do a good, workmanlike job. But it is necessary also to study the local newspapers. If the editor spells librarian with a small "l", the releases from the librarian should do the same, even though he

personally thinks it is important enough to be capitalized. The managing editor's style should not be imitated for he is interested only in concise, accurate facts, not in style. He wants all of the facts and the name of the person to contact in case he desires additional information.

A good yardstick to use for a library news story is: Is it of interest to people? Has it just happened or happened nearby? Is it unusual? Does it have human interest? Does it concern important names? Does it affect the reader directly? One or more answers to these questions are in many of these topics: promotions, appointment of new staff members, retirement, new collections, the installation or opening of an exhibit, report of a board meeting, an anniversary, film showing, special program, visitors, campaign for funds, an annual report, open house, new building, gifts, cooperative programs with other community agencies, attendance and participation in state and national conventions and meetings.

In addition to news releases, a library can help develop feature materials or provide information that a staff news man or woman can work into a feature story. The nice thing about a feature story is that it makes good reading at any time, the only important test being--is it interesting? In presenting feature material the librarian can ask a question, such as "Looking for something? Why not try the Smithfield Public Library?" Or he can make an assertion: "The Smithfield Public Library saves local businessmen thousands of dollars" or use an arresting factual statement: "Thanksgiving isn't what it used to be." He can also use a quotation or paraphrase a quotation or familiar statement, present a contrast or relate an anecdote. Keeping a calendar of materials well in advance of the actual date of an historical event or a holiday will save time and effort and often result in good publicity. After assembling all the materials and facts, then write a note to the editor informing him of the story. He will either do the work himself or assign a staff member to make use of the story materials. This not only gets good publicity for the library but most important of all, it establishes the best kind of public relations with the newspaper editor and writers.

One of the most important things for the librarian to know, when working with a newspaper editor, is the schedule of deadlines and how far in advance he likes to receive material. It is the better part of discretion not to telephone or call on an editor without an appointment, for he may be right at a deadline himself, and this is no way to make a friend of any editor. The best procedure is to write a letter and ask him for the necessary

information or to make an appointment to speak with him personally when he is available. At the same time, the librarian can offer him the services of the reference and information departments. It is quite possible he has never even thought of using them.

If there is more than one newspaper in the town or community one should not be favored over the others. A news release with the same information should go to all papers. This is news and all papers have a right to it. It sometimes happens that one paper will use a release but another will not, however, this is no reason why the latter paper should ever be overlooked. Nothing irritates an editor more than the notion that news is being supplied to his competitor and withheld from him, unless it is telephoning him to ask if he has received the release and when it will appear in print. No one ever bats one hundred per cent with news releases and this is particularly true if only an occasional release is sent out. Like all other publicity, library publicity has to be constant to be effective.

After newspapers, perhaps, the most important avenue of communication is radio and television. An unskilled person who tries to use these media of communication can waste an enormous amount of time and money and garner few positive results. Unless, there is a talented person on the staff for radio or television broadcasting, it is preferable to turn to a professional in using these publicity channels. The librarian can make friends with the local broadcasters; supply them with "spot" announcements that are pertinent and well-couched; keep the stations informed about services and events in the library, and offer his help and services to them, personally. Good, ear-catching and arresting "spots" about services offered by all libraries make many more people aware of what libraries have to offer but there should be a constant flow of such material for effective results. The American Library Association issues a series of "spots" each month that can be tailored and fitted to each library's needs while the Public Relations Planner (Box 171, Tuckahoe 7, New York) includes ten spot announcements with their monthly service. They also have a series of three television slides, another series of three dramatized TV film spots, and a motion picture trailer in color and with sound for use in theaters, available at low cost.

Another potent force involved in "selling" is the use of display. Of course, libraries are not selling merchandise but they are selling service and ideas--ideas that can be used by people in business, in their family life, in their homes, in their schools, and in their community and national life. These ideas

may come from books, magazines, newspapers, films, slides, pictures, music, lectures, and many different kinds of programs and displays. Information about all of these things that the library has to offer can be conveyed by means of displays and posters both in the library and in outside areas.

Good displays and posters are the result of careful planning and often, the use of materials and methods developed by the professional display man. Every display must have a dominant theme and it must focus the attention of the viewer on the subject and make a distinct impression. Various agencies offer posters that can be used by libraries to publicize their services and their holdings but here, again, libraries can make use of professional talent. If the librarian has established good public relations in his community, it is often possible to interest the display man at the bank or the department store in doing an outside window about the library's services. Or, perhaps, a group of libraries in a given area could work together on a professional display that would stress the informational and reference services offered by all of the libraries. This could be circulated for display in places of business, county fairs, Grange meetings, conventions, and any place where it would be seen by a large number of people. By sharing costs of a professional display each contributing library stands to gain much more in the long view.

In summing up, the reference and information services in any kind of library can be made better known by adopting some of the methods and making use of the publicity media that are used so successfully by many other professions and particularly by business. There must be good public relations before there can be good publicity. The publicity must be honest at all times and must never create a demand that cannot be met, for this will only result in bad public relations.

By working with groups of all kinds a wider audience can be reached more effectively and more economically. By cooperating with groups and agencies of all kinds, the library--whether it be a public, private, or special library--can become a real center of culture and communication.

Anyone can learn to use accepted techniques for publicizing services by means of newspapers, radio and television, and display. Some libraries in smaller communities pool their talent and equipment to produce brochures, book lists, announcements, and releases that can be used by all of the group. Still others, make use of the services of volunteers who have particular skills in this direction.

✓ If good public relations are established in the area--it may

be community, university, college or company, depending on the kind of library--people in other fields can be relied on to help publicize the services and holdings of the library. There is no reason why a library should buy advertising space in papers or on radio or television. Hundreds of libraries in all sections of the country provide newspapers with materials for news and feature articles as well as columns, regularly, without cost. The same libraries make use of other publications, such as fraternal and social bulletins, gas and electric bill enclosures, house organs, and dozens of other outlets, without cost. This is also true of many display outlets and display materials, which are supplied free of charge by business and industry who have been "sold" on the library.

Any program designed to help publicize the information and reference services of a library takes time but careful planning and a working knowledge of techniques plus cooperation with other agencies and groups will not only cut the working time in half but also make the publicity more effective. If there is no working publicity program for the library at the present time why not begin to plan for an all-out effort that will culminate in the observance of National Library Week in March? The main objective should be to inform people, of all interests and ages, about the library's resources and services and to encourage people to make the maximum use of these resources and services. Remember, a library will grow in resources and influence only as its use increases.

References

1. American Library Association. Public Library Service; A Guide to Evaluation, with Minimum Standards. Chicago, The Association, 1956, p. 13.