Circulation Service and Public Relations

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An old-time vaudeville comedian used to tell an amusing story of how he once went to a library to take out a book, but took out one of the circulation assistants instead. One can assume that the library assistant was charming and adroit in developing good public relations. Of course, she had a perfect right to be alluring, but no librarian has the right to be more alluring than a book.

Public relations are a way of life and involve people, not things. Since they are concerned with the relationships of people, they spring from the individual. Like metabolism, public relations work goes on all the time, so relentlessly that no one in public life can avoid it or ignore it. On the contrary, he should always be at the controls and see to it that his public relations are good rather than bad, or indifferent. The degree to which a person gets along well with other persons, and they, in turn, get along with him, measures the effectiveness of his public relations.

Institutions, as well as individuals, develop public relations because institutions are after all merely groups of individuals. The public relations of institutions are rather tangled and overlapping, however, for they involve not only the interplay of human relations, but also the evolving policies and traditional practices of the institution. The dedicated staff members of an institution therefore have the twofold obligation of serving their patrons diligently and of shaping the policies of their institution so that it becomes a public benefit rather than a public hindrance.

In any library the public relations of circulation service fall into two categories: individual and institutional. Since the personal relations of the staff members are no different from those of personnel in other library departments, they need no special consideration. Suffice it so say, ability and affability, cordiality and courtesy, eagerness and energy, and all the other desirable traits of an ideal public servant are the sine qua non for employment in circulation service. From the point

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Circulation Service and Public Relations

of view of public relations, the circulation department is probably the most sensitive within a library for almost all of the patrons come to the circulation desk at one time or another. Just as the floorwalker and sales clerks of a department store can make or break their firm, the staff of a circulation department can build or destroy the reputation of a library.

In short, circulation assistants are the good-will ambassadors of the library. Their best efforts will be in vain, however, unless the institutional public relations are also kept in good repair. No matter how competent and pleasant a library assistant might be, he can never improve public relations if he is obliged to follow unsound policies or adhere to outmoded practices. He may become well liked and highly respected as an individual but until the library administration sets its house in order, the institution will be shunned by dissatisfied and irate patrons. Policies and practices, then, together with rules and regulations determine the matrix in which institutional public relations are molded. So far as can be determined, the institutional public relations of circulation service have heretofore never been critically analyzed.

Before delving into the main problem, it is important to emphasize that the primary function of librarianship is education. Librarians strive by means of the printed page "to promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding," which time honored phrase appears in the Charter of the Carnegie Corporation. The immediate goal of library circulation service is to induce patrons to borrow good books. Members of a well-managed circulation department also endeavor to persuade potential borrowers to become enthusiastic users. Thus, circulation service becomes analogous to merchandising. If a circulation librarian accepts this analogy, he should also adhere to the motto: "The customer is always right." But, he must never take the motto literally. In his role as educator, the librarian cannot assume that the library patron is always right or always knows what he wants. One of the primary duties of a librarian is to teach his clientele, tactfully of course, how to use a library. To this extent only does the circulation librarian part company from the simon-pure merchandiser. The latter's ambition is to wait upon his customers in such a manner that they will continue to trade with him. What more could a circulation librarian desire to accomplish?

Having satisfied himself of the true nature of circulation service, a circulation librarian should examine his department objectively to determine:
HARRY C. BAUER

1. Whether it bears a good reputation.
2. Whether its clientele is satisfied and pleased with the services rendered.
3. Whether its staff members are loyal, satisfied, and proud to be affiliated with it.
4. Whether top management has a favorable attitude toward the department.

Then and only then is he ready to develop a sound public relations program. His study of the department will undoubtedly reveal, however, that the public relations will need to be remedial as well as constructive. The constructive public relations have to do with those policies and practices essential to the maintenance of a flourishing department, and the remedial with those modifications and improvements in policies and practices that are requisite for bringing the department up to par.

A few individuals are born with a knack for sustaining almost perfect public relations. Institutions are never so fortunate. Their public relations can be improved but they can never be perfected. The small patronage enjoyed by libraries is a clear indication of their shortcomings.

A library is inherently a makeshift. Since the cost is prohibitive and the maintenance too troublesome, most persons cannot assemble a well-rounded library collection. Communities of citizens or scholars therefore must pool their resources if they expect to obtain any kind of satisfactory library service. Still, their needs will only partially be met by the libraries thus established. What an individual cannot provide for himself cannot assuredly be provided for him by society. True, a social institution is merely a group of individuals, but it never fulfills the aspirations of any one of the individuals.

Besides being a makeshift, a library is a compromise. For instance, it is apt to be inaccessible to many of its constituents, its books dirty and shabby, and its services not adequate to satisfy many patrons. Since libraries have not won universal acceptance despite the fact that they are free or are subsidized by compulsory subscriptions, there must be something basically wrong with them. The public relations of circulation service, as well as of the other phases of library service, must therefore be aimed toward the final removal of every deterrent to library use.

The institutional public relations of circulation service in a given library are profoundly affected by the policies, practices, procedures,
Circulation Service and Public Relations

rules, regulations, and traditions of the library. As C. A. Schoenfeld has pointed out, "Public relations, in the proper sense of the term, is primarily a matter of institutional conduct and only secondarily a matter of publicity." Perhaps the easiest way of analyzing the public relations of circulation service is to “wipe the slate clean” of so-called institutional deterrents to reading, and focus attention upon an idealistic circulation department manned by an able and conscientious staff intent upon encouraging library patrons to borrow volumes from an excellent book stock. Would public relations be improved if all rules and regulations were abolished? Certainly, if the rules and regulations were unsound. Might there not be, however, certain standard procedures and practices as well as helpful rules and regulations, that would be conducive to good public relations? Let us see what actual experience reveals.

In conducting any type of public service, the goal is always the same: to provide a client with whatever it is he wishes, just so long as other individuals are not injured in the process. In any library, the function of circulation service is to provide patrons with desired books, efficiently, expeditiously, and if possible, economically. If a circulation department can achieve this goal, its public relations should be smooth and untroubled.

A librarian who is a stickler for rules and regulations and methodical procedures may sense that there must be something wrong with any proposal for carefree and rule free administration, but may not see at a glance how to controvert so appealing and disarming a suggestion. Let us, therefore, follow this tack to see where it leads us. Commencing with the public service motto: “Always assist a person in having his own way unless his way interferes with others,” imagine a circulation department that operates on a laissez faire policy, free of all rules and regulations on the assumption that every patron will govern himself according to the Golden Rule.

An hypothetical patron visits this department and selects several books that he wishes to borrow. He takes them to the circulation desk and his library negotiations begin. Since he has made his own choices, he presumably knows what he wants, though from the excessive number of volumes that he has garnered, a librarian might suspect that his “bite” is bigger than his “chew.” In the light of the accepted motto, how far can the librarian go towards accommodating him or at least placating him? If he has chosen too many popular titles, other patrons may be inconvenienced. He and the librarian must therefore bargain to reach an agreement as to the optimum number of volumes that
HARRY C. BAUER

can be granted to him without injury to other library users. Since there are no existing rules or regulations, he next must declare how long he intends to retain the volumes. Now he is apt to fret for he has not given this question any thought. All he wants to do is to take some books home to read. According to a fundamental law of human behavior, "men seek to gratify their desires with the least exertion." The borrower wonders why the library has not established a regular loan period for the lending of books? Here he is thwarted in his desire to borrow books simply because the library has neglected to adopt definite procedures for the conduct of its circulation department. It is conceivable that every book chosen by him could be charged for a length of time commensurate with its depth and breadth. In order to wind up the transaction, however, let us assume that an agreement is reached allowing withdrawal of the books for a period of four weeks. After the patron leaves, the wearied librarian realizes that every loan transaction cannot be turned into a "production number."

If there is a moral here it is that books should be issued for a specified length of time in the interest of good public relations if for no other reasons. Most public and academic libraries do establish definite rules governing loan periods and the number of volumes that may be withdrawn at any one time. Special libraries, on the other hand, often permit an unlimited number of books to be withdrawn for indefinite periods. In practice, collegiate libraries ordinarily extend similar courtesies to faculty members and graduate students. The tendency, however, is to formalize the charging of books, thereby enabling staff members to serve a large clientele expeditiously and efficiently. Definite procedures and sound regulations can therefore actually foster good public relations, but they must always be reasonable, and never inflexible. Exceptions should not only be countenanced but encouraged. Since library service is designed to meet the needs of the individual, librarians should consider carefully the needs of every patron.

It is the inflexible enforcement of rules and regulations that discourages readers, arouses animosity and discontent, and eventually destroys an otherwise good public relations program. Very few library patrons become disgruntled in a library where every staff member applies the rules judiciously without undue inconvenience to the patrons. A library staff can actually "have its cake and eat it, too," if the basic maxim of allowing every patron to have his own way is fostered by carefully planned procedures and sensible practices.

The major problems that arise in circulation service result from the
Circulation Service and Public Relations

multiplicity of rules and regulations many of which are neither understood nor appreciated by the patrons. It is sheer folly for a circulation librarian to deny a borrower fiction books unless he also selects some works of non-fiction. This procedure merely creates the impression that the librarians are bureaucrats intent upon discouraging use of the library. Extending this idea, the librarian who refuses to accept telephoned renewals is simply unaccommodating, inefficient, and unbusinesslike. There is more than one way “to skin a cat.” The library that extends its loan period from two weeks to four weeks effectually reduces the number of requests for renewal without jeopardizing its public relations.

It must be remembered, however, that public relations are unpredictable. If they were not, there would be no problems in public relations, and all circulation services could be as standardized as an electric light socket. Enhanced privileges do not invariably meet with public favor. A few years ago, an academic library lengthened its loan period from two weeks to four weeks, confident that every one would be pleased with the new policy. There arose such a clamor among faculty and students that the new procedure had to be discarded. The reactions of people to well-intentioned innovations cannot be foretold. Since human inertia is a strange phenomenon, the clientele of any establishment must be persuaded not shocked into acceptance of change.

As yet no one has found any a priori basis for determining an optimum loan period for books varying in size from fewer than a hundred to more than a thousand pages. Until an optimum is discovered, most librarians will have to be content to specify two-week or four-week loan periods excepting for books in great demand. When a librarian decides to refuse renewals, public relations should not suffer provided generous provision is made for a patron with a legitimate request for extension of the loan period. It is axiomatic that public relations suffer whenever a request is denied. Consequently, a librarian is justified in an adamant attitude only when other patrons have requested a book that a borrower wishes to renew.

This extended recital of a circulation transaction devoid of rules and regulations has been presented in order to demonstrate that rules and regulations can justifiably be enforced in the public interest, but it should be emphasized that rules and regulations would be totally unnecessary in a library with only one patron. Traffic regulations and “rules of the road” are essential because a library has many patrons and strives continually to attract more.
In most libraries books are not in great demand during the summer months. Some public libraries, therefore, advertise extended loans in an effort to encourage vacationists to borrow books for extended loan periods. As the amount of reading accomplished during vacation months is small and library shelves are overcrowded, the vacation loan privilege is at least good publicity if not too significant in terms of improved public relations.

Standardized loan periods naturally imply a policing system for the retrieval of overdue books. Whether the penalty is the mild two-cents a day charged by most public libraries, or the more drastic ten to twenty-five cents per day assessed by collegiate libraries, the results are the same. A fine is a fine and never enhances a library’s public relations. The circulation department of a library probably loses as much good will through the assessment of fines as it would from employment of short-tempered staff members. In spite of this, most librarians believe that library fines must be assessed to insure the prompt return of books. Their point of view has never been fully proven; library fines may actually be ineffectual. Small departmental libraries on university campuses are known to operate successfully without the assessment of fines. A few small and moderate-sized public libraries have abolished fines without dire results. So far as is known, however, no large university or public libraries have dispensed with fines.

If a delinquent borrower can be made to realize that a library does not benefit from accrued fines, he may not feel too bitterly about the assessment, but he is still not going to accept it graciously. (Is there a librarian in America who can truthfully say that he does not mind paying a fine for traffic violation?) Though university library fines are relatively high, cost of collection is too great to allow for any contribution to university revenues. In contrast, the fines charged by public libraries, though low, accumulate rapidly and have a beneficial effect upon municipal revenues. The librarian of a public library might therefore hesitate before dispensing with them. Perhaps some bold thinking should be done on the problem by both public and academic librarians.

There are several neat little questions concerning the knotty problem of fines. Should they, for instance, be permitted to accrue after they exceed the price of a book? Considered logically, fines are penalties and should therefore have no relationship to the price or value of a book. Logic, however, is seldom the key to good public relations. No borrower retains good will towards a library that charges
Circulation Service and Public Relations

him a ten dollar fine on a three dollar volume even though he may accept full responsibility for late return.

To be considered along with fines are charges for lost books and penalties for mutilation. In connection with these matters, a librarian serves more as a public custodian than as a reader's advocate and should if necessary, be indifferent to public relations. Borrowers who lose books or keep them out too long are often among a library's best patrons, but vandals should never be considered in a well-directed public relations program. This is the one phase and only phase of a library's public relations program that can be negative.

With further reference to library policing, some of the larger institutions employ guards or bouncers. The latter have very little relationship to circulation service, but it is probably unnecessary to state that guards at portals have a stifling as well as salutary effect upon library habitués. Obviously, incunabula and other rare treasures must be protected against thieves and vandals. Otherwise, guards are of no great advantage, since their salaries amount to much more than the pilferage they only partially check. Furthermore, they do not contribute to the growth of a library's good will. The average person does not like to be under constant surveillance and restraint. There are a few Pharisees in every group who will heartily approve of guards and will applaud a library's efforts "to protect its properties" and, dare one add, inconvenience its patrons? Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of guards, it is safe to conclude that guards are not a boon to good public relations.

Before proceeding further in our analysis of the public relations of circulation service, careful consideration should be given to the repeated use of the word, "public." J. H. Wright and B. H. Christian have defined public relations as "a planned program of policies and conduct that will build public confidence and increase public understanding." What do they mean by "public"? Other authorities attest that there are as many publics as there are individuals. A person can easily cope with an infinite number and variety of publics since all he has to do is play the proper role, adjusting himself to the traits and characteristics of those with whom he does business. As Shakespeare observed, living is acting and everyone is acting all the time. For instance, a man behaves differently in a tavern from the way he conducts himself in a tabernacle.

So it is with his public relations; if wise, he responds appropriately in all his relationships with other persons. This is not to imply that
good public relations come naturally. They must be cultivated and
nurtured. Even then, a man cannot hope to succeed all of the time.
He is bound to displease certain persons. Incompatibilities arise in
spite of mutual desires for understanding. Most of the time, however,
man can succeed in his public relations because he is resilient and
adaptable.

Institutional public relations are, on the other hand, necessarily
troublesome because rules and regulations, practices and procedures,
are fixed and unresponsive to individual differences. A rule that pleases
some persons will displease others. Non-smokers rejoice in seeing "No
Smoking" signs, while tobacco addicts are disdainful of such signs
and ignore them whenever possible. Thus, it is impossible for an in-
stitution to devise a "single packet" public relations program. It must
address its best efforts to its various publics separately. In library
circulation service the publics are legion. To reach them in any other
manner than a laissez faire fashion, it is necessary to group them into
appropriate clusters. Therefore, in developing a sound public relations
program a circulation department must know its grouped publics.
They can, of course, be divided into a myriad of minority groups
and arranged in many different combinations.

For all practical purposes, however, the significant publics can be
reduced to a workable minimum. A circulation department serves
men and women; boys and girls; teachers and students; working men
and housewives; and business men and professional men. These are
its primary and most important publics. It is seen that there is con-
siderable over-lapping in publics; boys and girls are also students.
This does not matter; one type of service can be provided for boys
and girls, and a more specialized service for these same patrons in
their capacity as students. Incidentally, a circulation librarian also
has relations with book dealers, equipment dealers, other library staff
members, colleagues in other institutions, and top management, but
it is to the major groups that the public relations of circulation service
are chiefly directed. Each of the major groups develops its own public
opinion based upon its own interests. In a public library, the business
men may frown upon the harboring of tramps and loafers; in an
academic library, the studious readers may frown upon the frivolous
students who look upon the library as a rendezvous. In other words,
every group is a special interest group consisting of special pleaders,
and a circulation department must endeavor to serve all groups im-
partially and diligently.

As stated earlier, good public relations cannot be predicated upon
Circulation Service and Public Relations

the notion that each group can actually have its own way. In its negotiations with its patrons, a circulation department must endeavor to work out adjustments and compromises that will do justice to all; and adequately provide for the vast majority of patrons. In some instances, therefore, good public relations programs must be aimed towards retaining public confidence and understanding while at the same time denying certain urgent requests. Consequently, after delineating the various publics that it serves, a circulation department needs to obtain facts about each group. What these publics want, what they think about the library, why they think the way they do, and how they arrive at their opinions are questions of utmost importance in developing good public relations programs. Actually all that a librarian must do is to place himself in the position of the public and decide how he, too, would like to be served. He is not likely to go far wrong if he relies upon this simple procedure unless he happens to be so abnormal as to be unable to understand the point of view of another person.

Every service that a circulation department renders has overtones affecting public relations. Rental collections, sometimes euphemistically referred to as pay-duplicate collections, are nowadays taken for granted and generally accepted by library patrons. The propriety of a public library or tax-supported university library maintaining such collections has never been resolved. The library public anxious to obtain new books while they are still relatively clean and popular will approve highly of such collections. The library public that expects every book to be available free of charge will view such collections with misgivings. From time to time, small shops that maintain their own rental collections complain bitterly when a nearby library installs a rental collection. The possibility of arousing resentment and animosity should always be taken into account when a library projects new services. In other words, before establishing a rental collection a circulation department must take all of its publics into consideration. Rental collections have flourished in one community and languished in others. Some have aroused enough enmity to warrant abandonment.

Circulation librarians should be innovators and experimenters. A new service however well planned may fail or cause unrest, but it can usually be scrapped and forgotten without too much trouble. Some librarians dread the necessity of reversing themselves and believe that they will lose caste when a well-intentioned innovation backfires. If only they would realize that they are engaged in public service and
are appointed to serve their clientele rather than to hew to their own personal likes and dislikes! A library exists for the patrons, not for the librarians.

A number of convincing reasons for dispensing with the registration of borrowers, and the issuance of library membership or courtesy cards can be marshalled. If the registration work in circulation departments could be dropped, libraries would undoubtedly save considerable sums of money. Practically everyone over the age of sixteen carries a plethora of identification cards. Why should a library go to needless expense to issue still one additional card? There are cogent reasons enough for supplying patrons with library membership cards, but even if there were not, good public relations would be the clincher. The truth of the matter is that people like to register and receive membership cards if the amount of red-tape involved is not excessive. To have a special card made out in one's own name inflates the ego. A patron of a library likewise would presumably have a greater affinity for and attachment to a library with which he is duly enrolled and officially authorized to carry a membership card.

Logic, efficiency, and economy are not nearly such effective tools of public relations as are appeals to man's pride and vanity. Simple souls are not the only ones that like to have their vanity massaged. Prominent citizens, V.I.P.'s, and other persons who are ambitious to be leaders early develop an inordinate amount of vanity. A sophisticated scholar, for instance, recently inquired of a university librarian what he would need to do to obtain stack privileges. When he was informed that he did not have to do anything at all, and that the librarian was pleased to open the doors of the establishment to him, the scholar left the librarian's office crestfallen and rather dubious about the privileges that had been extended to him.

One of the pleasures of work in a circulation department is the librarian's duty to cater to public opinion, not to attempt to reshape it. The librarian has nothing to foist on the public but can devote all his attention to lending books courteously, efficiently, and enthusiastically. A library patron is not greatly affected by a particular charging system so long as it does not retard him or put him to great inconvenience. Since everyone is a creature of habit, however, and endowed with inertia, a change in charging systems may upset patrons unless full discussion and description precedes installation. This is particularly true if a "Do It Yourself" or self-service charging device is being considered. Americans have a penchant for gadgets and ma-
Circulation Service and Public Relations

machines and machine charging is likely to appeal to the majority of readers.

Free access to all the books in a library collection is becoming the rule of the day. Many academic libraries now open their book stacks to all comers and new collegiate library buildings are being constructed with this end in view. Public libraries are also following the same pattern. In the liberalizing of stack privileges, there are two publics to be kept in mind; those who previously had access and those who newly acquire the right. Ordinarily, the latter public should be enthusiastic over the liberalized policy, whereas those who already had access gain nothing in the transition but actually lose the exclusiveness previously enjoyed. Naturally, they view the evolution as a revolution and will probably resent the change until they discover that they are not greatly affected by the extension of service to others.

If the book stacks are opened to the public, a circulation department immediately has a new public relations problem. The amount of internal housekeeping resulting from the change is appreciable. The books must be kept in good order on the shelves and shelf-reading carried on continuously. There is not much that circulation librarians can do about dingy shelves or shabby volumes but they can keep the books in proper order on the shelves. Otherwise, public relations will deteriorate and patrons will be heard to complain, “You can’t find anything in that library,” or simply “The place is a mess.”

Competent and intelligent staff members contribute greatly to the public relations of a circulation department. A library assistant who can speak with authority and conviction is bound to win friends for a library. In every library there are numerous opportunities for educating library patrons. Youths and newcomers may be instructed in the use of card catalogs as well as the intricacies of the library’s classification system; in short, how to be at home in the library and serve themselves. Perhaps in no better way can a circulation assistant endear himself to library patrons than by his ability to make appropriate substitutions when desired books are not owned by the library or are charged out to other patrons. A librarian can go one step further. After learning a patron’s likes and dislikes, he can recommend old favorites or new acquisitions that are sure to please. This presupposes, of course, that the librarian have good common sense as well as a sound grasp of the nature and contents of the book stock.

Since the members of a circulation department serve the vast majority of a library’s patrons, they have innumerable opportunities to
enhance the public relations of the library. They can, for instance, invite borrowers to recommend books for purchase; notify patrons when sought after books are returned; and extend as many courtesies as possible, and thus win good will and gain the confidence and trust of readers.

No attempt need be made to delineate each and every way in which circulation service affects public relations. The services analyzed have been chosen because they lend validity to the notion that rules and regulations, procedures, and practices are detrimental to good public relations unless they are wisely administered. Similar analyses of the hours of opening; the segregation of questionable books on restricted shelves; the handling of books that must be used in the library only; the delays in service resulting from late acquisition of new titles; publications tied up at a bindery, and slow service at the delivery desk; inconvenience occasioned by the decentralization of special collections; inaccessibility of the library; parking difficulties; loans to non-residents or outsiders; assessment of special fees; and merely the absence of books from the shelves, would further reinforce the evidence. Everything that takes place in circulation service makes an impression upon library patrons.

The indirect negotiations conducted by circulation department librarians through correspondence or telephone calls are particularly important in public relations. However they do not involve unique problems. Post-card overdue notices and other library forms must be couched in well-chosen terms if good public relations are to result. Telephone technique and courtesy are also essential to good public relations.

Publicity is often confused with public relations whereas it is only one of the minor and least important phases of the broad problem. A circulation department can cultivate very fine public relations without taking the trouble to publicize its services. Nevertheless, public relations work is often jocularly defined as “doing a good job and telling the world about it.” Library publicity should simply be used to acquaint the public with the library’s aims, accomplishments, and resources. Other types of publicity might be amusing, harmless, or even innocuous, but in the long run they would be inconsequential.

The staff of a circulation department has an obligation towards colleagues within the profession. The professional library journals afford the best means for informing colleagues of progress in the field of librarianship. If a circulation department invents a new kind of charging system or devises a new workable procedure, other librarians
Circulation Service and Public Relations

should learn of it through articles in the journals. Such efforts on the part of librarians are of two-fold benefit: they help to publicize a library, and, what is more important, provide other librarians with just the information that they may have been seeking.

What circulation librarians do, how they perform their duties, what they say, what they write, and the impressions they make upon library patrons determine to a large extent the success of their public relations. In other words, performance and conduct are the true gauges of good public relations. When all is said and done, people are the primary consideration in public relations. We are therefore well advised to conclude that the Golden Rule, “Dealing with others as we would have them deal with us,” is the best prescription for public relations in circulation service. “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”

References