



# Professional Associations' Role in Public Relations

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“PROMOTE, ENCOURAGE, AND FOSTER” are words often used in expressing library association objectives. Intrinsicly, these are public relations-minded concepts. When they are interpreted in terms of “good will” toward libraries, the association is assigned a definite responsibility for an “active” public relations role. This responsibility is even properly placed in the organization. Public relations, because of its indefinable limits, is regarded as a management function. In an association the officers, committees, and headquarters staff are the “management.” So, by simply assuming that a library association is born public relations-conscious and has put the job in appropriate hands, the scope and direction of the public relations effort may be explored.

With even minimum study, the complexity of the scope becomes apparent. One is forced to recognize quite quickly that public relations cannot be isolated but is an integral part of the association's total operation. A wide range of existing and proposed activities will require attention. These extend from a large-scale promotion program, through an infinite number of publicity projects, to the intangible of an attitude. In limiting such a sweeping area to a practicable plan, the association “management” becomes judge, prophet, and opportunist. There are obligations to establish priorities on immediate needs, to determine the long-term aims, and to remain alert for each new opportunity which may arise.

Association public relations will stem in two directions just as it does in a business organization. One communications program is planned for the public; and another, as the case may be, is planned for members or employees. Assuredly, the two may often be very

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similar but quite distinct interests are served for the basic objectives are a library-minded public and a happily rewarded, public-relations-minded profession. Such objectives also demand an integrated communications pattern. The public and the librarian must understand each other to engender the coveted results of "good" public relations and mutual satisfaction.

The association only begins to fulfill its management function by developing a public relations plan. Organization, operation, and evaluation are further essential management processes. All demand serious attention if the association wishes to be aggressive rather than optimistically hopeful in carrying out its responsibility as spokesman for libraries and librarianship.

Organizing and operating the public relations program requires that sufficient money, expert advice, and suitable materials are provided. These factors have a particular importance, for many times the public relations plan will operate through member librarians everywhere who make up the communications network. To do the job well, they must be adequately equipped. In a sense, this is like furnishing a salesman with enough samples and making certain that his training includes the knowledge he will require to present his product and to answer the questions about it. Member librarians deserve no less.

Every plan, once it is in operation, is subject to evaluation. Here, the public relations program may present problems because measurement is bound to be difficult. Costs and benefits will not always adapt themselves to a neat, orderly pattern for tabulation. This circumstance should be less perplexing to those who attempt to calculate the value of library service than to many others for both are filled with intangibles which resist a dollar and cents interpretation. By the same token, anyone in the library field should have developed the ability to astutely sense the probable benefits. If the evidence and the "best guess" about the public relations program indicate that it has fallen short in bringing about the desired result, there is fair warning to find out why this program is not hitting home, revise the sights and develop a new plan to remedy the weaknesses.

Some of the generalizations are in order before discussing the specifics involved in the association role. The public relations program cannot be a one-time or even a sometime thing. Sporadic campaigns, no matter how energetic, with little support during the intervening periods, do not suffice. To be successful public relations is continuous and is part and parcel of every day's activity. The results of attention

given to it may not be readily apparent but neglect may be dishearteningly conspicuous.

Since the librarians themselves are ultimately responsible for building the reputation of libraries and librarianship, what the association does for them becomes a foremost consideration. In essence, this amounts to assisting the individual librarian to present his "best front" from the public relations point of view. A suggested minimum plan for internal communication is one which offers both training and good logistic support. It is an educational program and a publications program.

The public relations educational program is conducted mainly through the media of the profession's journals, meetings, and technical manuals. It is designed to cultivate a wider appreciation of the meaning and value of public relations and to extend the knowledge of public relations' techniques and applications. For the practical mind and the "too busy" librarian more than theory must be provided. The report of a successful publicity venture in one library stimulates interest on the part of another. The straightforward suggestion on how-to-do-it may be given a trial. The value of group meetings and discussion groups should not be overlooked since speeches and demonstrations are sometimes far more effective than written words. Librarians have long been proponents of the importance of manuals or handbooks and a few on subjects akin to public relations may prove worth-while. A consultation and advisory service, on whatever scale it can be established, should find customers. And finally, the association in its relationships with members must provide the best possible public relations example.

The publications program offers a thoughtfully developed and expertly prepared group of promotional pieces which by virtue of association sponsorship are accorded due authority. These are the material aids which the individual librarian needs to do his part of the over-all public relations job but cannot provide for himself. Their form, message, and use are matters for consideration by the best talent the association can obtain. Posters, pamphlets, films, general press releases, and certain types of exhibits all fall within this category. They are the tools for recruitment campaigns, the take-home reminders of a speech, and the adopted views of the profession on legislative matters.

It is granted that the services to members which have been mentioned are not new. The associations have worked along such lines for a long time. It is also granted that public relations is just a part

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of the association's job and deserves only its rightful place in the total picture. But, a more diligently pursued internal program is needed until doubt and hesitancy about sound promotion disappear, until the individual recognizes that he must do something himself to achieve truly "good" public relations and until the whole idea of creative library public relations becomes a thoroughly natural development.

Even though top billing is given to those phases of the public relations plan which operate through the membership, association responsibility for direct action is neither minimized nor lessened. Special public relations programs, press coverage on professional developments, and routine publicity are equally important aspects of the total program.

The usual publicity based on conferences, conventions, and group meetings may be too "old hat" for mention but prompts a thought about good press relations. Actually, this is nothing more than a reminder to find the time needed for interviews and to offer it graciously. Cooperation and a friendly attitude are the little things that count. They add up to the "even break" that everybody wants.

Since much conference publicity is focused on individuals, it brings to mind the news possibilities which are provided by numerous professional, or otherwise noteworthy accomplishments of members. These may reach the "press" through personal initiative or through an employer. If not, the association can fill the breach. There is a haunting thought that if more people knew more about librarians as personalities, as scholars, and as citizens the profession would hit a ten-strike.

It is just plain good business to take advantage of the public relations value of every association activity. The important thing is to develop a good watch-dog technique and not allow any public relations potential to escape notice. General association matters, committee or group projects, and headquarters services make up a fairly wide area for surveillance but alertness should pay off well in terms of news releases and feature articles.

Association policies and professional developments which affect the betterment of society deserve to be made known generally. They point up the place of libraries and librarians in the world and record the attempts to forward its progress. Association concern about international affairs, education, and professional standards are basic examples.

Committee and group activities provide the subject material for a continuing publicity program. Happenings are reported as they occur throughout the year and fill in the spaces between the "big" events. Any association publication, unless it is completely library-centered, has a reader somewhere outside the profession. The announcement of an institute on library buildings holds attraction for an architect. A salary study interests any number of non-library groups. Special services designed for schools, city government officials, or industrial organizations are used only by those who are aware of their existence. An award established for or received by a librarian adds prestige. A scholarship gains popularity when the recipient's name is familiar. Such a list could go on almost indefinitely.

Headquarters operations and services which involve relationships with the public lend a stout hand in creating a favorable view of the profession. The value of vigilantly maintained public relations at this location cannot be over-estimated for headquarters is the association's permanent representative and continuing force. It enjoys something of an impartial position through being part but not of the profession and conceivably, by virtue of this status, speaks more freely and is heard with lesser charge of prejudice. The executive secretary, the placement officer, the public relations director, and others contribute in an infinite degree to the reputation of both the association and the profession.

This is a bit like leaving the icing on the cake until last. Some of the very "best" public relations come about through cooperation with non-library groups. No matter whether these lead to events which are large or small, each will testify to the fact that the association's own public relations is "good." Effectively combining the librarians' interests with those of another profession or successfully enlisting the support of a non-library group must mean that an adequate job has been done in telling the library side of the "story."

Joint professional endeavors are a definite gain from the public relations point of view. Two or more voices are raised instead of one and the impact on public opinion increases proportionately. Such joint efforts are beneficial in other ways; through them common interests are identified, mutual regard is acknowledged, and notions of professional isolation disappear. Meetings, campaigns, or just simply working together will add "friends" to the roster. No chance of participating in a worthy effort with another professional group should

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be dismissed lightly for by this means the professions begin to speak for each other.

Support of the library "cause" by civic, business, and philanthropic groups is another distinct area to be cultivated. The very recent past has seen some outstanding examples of what can be accomplished. Librarianship was included in the New York Life Insurance Company's series of advertisements on careers. Its wide magazine coverage and the availability of reprints for extensive distribution informed many people of the need for librarians and the advantages of library work. National Library Week, conducted under the sponsorship of the National Book Committee in cooperation with the American Library Association, was the first nation wide campaign on the behalf of reading and libraries. Through the media of print, radio, and television both a reading and listening public was contacted. "Operation Library," a project of the Junior Chamber of Commerce has spread from a state to an international program of gaining support for individual libraries. Achieving the financial and active aid of non-library groups, as represented in these instances, is a challenge to the library association and a true indication of its public relations ability and instinct.

The whole program of internal and external communication outlined in this article is a fairly large order. How much of a public relations package each association buys will depend upon its needs and ambitions in this direction. But, if widespread understanding and popularity of libraries is to materialize in the foreseeable future, an all-out library promotion plan is specified. The water will need to be tested with more than just one toe.