



Public Relations in Librarianship

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PUBLIC RELATIONS IS WITH THE PUBLIC. It is the relationship of your library with its borrowers, with the non-borrowers of your community, with your trustees or library committee, with dealers, collectors, salesmen of equipment; with scholars and contest solvers, with your staff and the administration for which you work. Public relations is with the public, and as true as in its Biblical context is the admonition, "Whatsoever you do unto the least of these . . ."

"Curse or blessing," C. D. MacDougall calls public relations. Either is possible. For your public relations is what you make it. It cannot be shuddered at and wished away, but it can be welcomed and made to serve you well. It is with you every minute of every day. It is waiting at your library doors. It is observing the cleanliness of your hallways and public rooms. It is reacting to the service of all your staff, listening in on telephone conversations, reading your mail. It follows you home, into your personal life. It accompanies you on all your ventures into the life of your community.

Public relations has been endowed with a kind of twentieth century magic by the corporations and their P.R. officers. Neither the corporations nor the P.R. men invented public relations. It has been with us since the beginning of trade. But the American business man has learned the foolishness of *caveat emptor* as a motto, has learned the dead end of selling wooden nutmegs. He has made the good will of his public part and parcel of the assets of his business. Public relations is as much a part of the daily life of a library as it is of any business. Perhaps more so, for a library is not self-supporting and depends, even more than the usual business, primarily on the good opinion of its patrons. It is the day-to-day building of the atmosphere of good will in which a library (or a business) can operate most widely

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and most effectively to give the best possible service to its public. As R. L. Heilbronner¹ wrote in *Harper's Magazine* for June 1957: "In a word, public relations covers a lot of acreage—blurring out into advertising, slopping over into selling, dipping down into publicity, and touching—or at least aspiring to—the 'making' of public opinion itself."

Edward W. Barrett, dean of Columbia University's School of Journalism, praises J. W. Hill, himself the ungowned dean of American P.R. men, for seeing "public relations as a broad management function—more precisely . . . as the management function of giving the same organized and careful attention to the asset of good will as is given to any other major asset of the business."² Public relations may well be the most important asset—"the priceless ingredient," to quote the phrase that one firm's advertising program has made famous—for bad public relations can cancel the good of every other asset.

With a knowledge of the experiences of other libraries and other types of organizations, public relations becomes perforce a do-it-yourself program. Public relations is the asset, is the program, most expressive of the individuality, the personality, of each separate library. It may be patterned emulatively, but never imitatively. It must be done according to the needs of your library. It must express as attractively (and as accurately) as possible your library to the public.

First, public relations must be properly fitted into the administrative pattern of your library. Few libraries can afford the services of a special public relations officer. For those that can, fine. University and college libraries often can work through a campus public relations office. In some cases, a city P.R. man is available to public libraries. Where a trained professional is available, it is an error both factual and tactical to direct public relations except through that individual. In other cases, public relations must be conducted as an auxiliary responsibility of the librarian or delegated to some other member of his staff. In both of these alternatives, however, it remains a function of management and the responsibility of the librarian.

A library's policies in many fields must be worked out thoroughly and wisely by the librarian and his governing board. Once worked out, policy must be implemented by actions which elucidate it in every function of the library and by every member of a library's staff. The right hand must know what to expect of the left hand. It is of basic importance for good public relations that all staff be kept as fully informed as possible, both of long-term library policy and im-

mediate newsworthy developments which relate to that policy. If not with a single voice, the library must at least speak in a consistent accent.

The extent of a library's services and resources must be well enough known for any and every employee to respond with accurate answers or definite and proper referrals to patrons' questions. There is hardly a greater disservice that a library can do its public relations program than to permit an employee to answer an inquiry with a "that's-not-my-business" type of reply. It matters not how extensive a library's services are if the attainment of those services becomes a dismaying pursuit of referrals from one functionary to another. Good service is the handmaiden of good public relations. This does not mean that every library must provide every service. It does mean that whatever service a library provides must be done well. A well considered "no" can be much more effective public relations than an ill considered "yes."

Public relations is as important within your organization as it is without. Staff relations are a part of public relations. Ability to work with a governing board is a part of public relations. And, once these relationships are satisfactorily established, each member of your staff, each member of your board becomes a part-time P.R. man for your library. But the more apparent aspects of public relations are those outside your management family. Public relations is with the public, but each library has several publics. There is its public which borrows books. There is a public made up of others in the same profession. There is a public, in some libraries at least, of scholars or professional users of materials.

Relations with the general borrowing public are broadest, most demanding, and, yet, easiest. Here the field is reasonably well defined. Here publicity (and publicity must be positively delimited as only a small aspect of public relations) can be effective. Here patrons' response is quickest and most vocal; if you are taking the wrong tack, someone will tell you so. Librarians generally have done good work with publicity, but it is too easy to forget that not all publicity is good publicity.

Publicity begins at home—or, at least, in the library profession itself. Staff news sheets, exhibits, guides to exhibits are all part of a library publicity program. The incidence of library publicity material of this type pitched at a kindergarten level is more appalling than appealing. Is it necessary that adult human beings approach the

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problem of announcing a staff party as if they were writing for the amusement of low grade morons? The same approach pervades much of the material issued in the name of recruiting for librarianship. Unless librarians write as intelligent people, how can intelligent people be recruited to the ranks of librarianship? The cute crack, the quick quip are devices best left to the experienced writer or to the professional adman. In the hands of the tyro, they too soon become an oversweetened syllabus, more fluff than substance and inclined to cloy. But staff news sheets can be informative, can be cleanly written and neatly printed. Recruiting pamphlets can be intelligently and attractively devised. Exhibits can be artfully and artistically arranged. If these things are done well, they make for good public relations. But there is no middle ground. It is better that they not be done at all than that they be done badly.

Newspaper publicity must be controlled within the management function of public relations, but it is practicably possible to delegate responsibility in this area. It is helpful both to the library and to a paper that one person be responsible for newspaper publicity. A minimum of experience can establish a satisfactory working relationship between a library and a reporter. He will know what he wants. It is your business to give him the facts. Handout journalism has been a corollary development of public relations as a profession. It is certainly not its healthiest aspect. Make information available to newspapers, but don't try to style it for them. Reporters are better reporters than are librarians.

Notices and articles in the library press are another aspect of continuing public relations. The unfortunate proliferation of library periodicals makes complete coverage impossible, cuts down the readership for any single journal, and lowers the average quality of writing on librarianship; but this is, nevertheless, a legitimate area for use in furthering public relations. Wide knowledge of one's own profession and of his colleagues in it is a prerequisite for general recognition of librarianship as a profession. Librarians are inclined to write too much solely for other librarians, talk too much to other librarians. Participation in national, regional, and local organizations of professional librarians is good public relations, particularly if such organizations reach other professions and the public in general. Individual participation by staff members is also good for a library. Individuals should be encouraged in membership in civic groups, professional organizations in specific subject fields, and in activity in

community projects. As useful as professional exchange is, articles in the non-library press, speeches before Rotary, Kiwanis, and other civic or special interest groups are especially rewarding.

Publicity and participation are merely vehicles of public relations. The public as a mass can be effectively reached through newspapers, radio, and television. The public as a special force in promoting the welfare of a library can be better and more directly reached through individual participation in the widest possible variety of activities. Public relations as a continuing function is a more important and a slower process. It is axiomatic that repeated incidental mention of a celebrity is more important to his reputation than one large splurge of publicity about him. Every time the library is mentioned favorably, every time an individual connected with the library appears in the community in a favorable light, good public relations are being built. Every time a library is listed among the acknowledgments in a published book, every time an individual sees a creditable publication from the library, every time an organization or an individual is helped by the library's services, the library increases in stature. The cumulative effects are unlimited: better budgets, adequate staffing, more books, finer buildings, easier recruiting—in a word: better libraries.

“Good will” is often listed in corporate assets as valued at \$1.00—not because it is worth little but because it is an intangible beyond practical evaluation. Good will is priceless. It is public relations that build good will. Libraries are a public or institutional service, tangible examples of good public relations on the part of a municipality, a corporation, or an educational institution providing informational and recreational resources to its constituency. Librarianship is a service profession. If librarians are to emphasize their work as a profession, interpreting as well as making available knowledge, this emphasis must be based on good service. It must be quality service at all levels of operations. Good service, conceived to support community and institutional goals, will automatically result in good public relations. Good public relations will create lasting good will.

References

1. Heilbronner, R. L.: Public Relations—The Invisible Sell. *Harper's Magazine*, 214:24, June 1957.
2. Barrett, E. W.: Business of Building Good Will. [Review] *Saturday Review*, 41:21, Jan. 18, 1958.