



Public Relations Activities of Special Libraries

IRENE M. STRIEBY

THE SCOPE OF MODERN PUBLIC RELATIONS is sufficiently broad for the special library whether it exists as a separate entity, as do a few, or as a working unit of a larger organization which is generally true of the vast majority. It is only with the latter type that this article is concerned. For the purpose of this discussion, only public relations activities of industrial libraries will be emphasized. Although this may seem a relatively restricted frame of reference, actually their activities are not too different from those of special libraries in government agencies, in insurance companies, in banks, in publishing houses, in medical societies, and in other types of organizations; each deals with a clientele limited by some factor such as size, geographical location, or subject interest.

Formation of special libraries, as components of the types of organizations mentioned above, began to gather momentum at least a half century ago, whereas the current and generally accepted connotation of public relations is scarcely a generation old. Thus, the development and evolution of the special library's public relations antedates the present concept of the term based, as it now is, on careful attention to good will as a professional goal rather than on specific techniques of reaching the goal. In the special library, public relations has been, from the beginning, a way of thinking translated into action. It continues to receive emphasis; otherwise the library would quickly lose its effectiveness.

Fortunately, the inception of the industrial library was never hampered with such traditions as are exemplified in *The Old Librarian's Almanack . . . for 1774* (Printed and sold by B. Mecom, at the Post-office in New-Haven, 1773), such as this one taken from the

The author is Library Consultant, Lilly Research Laboratories, Eli Lilly and Company.

Public Relations Activities of Special Libraries

section, *Timely Advice to Librarians*: "So far as your authority will permit of it, exercise great discrimination as to which persons shall be admitted to the use of the library. For the treasure house of literature is no more to be thrown open to the ravages of the unreasoning mob than is a fair garden to be laid unprotected to the mercy of a swarm of beasts." In this same source there are other examples of not just negative, but altogether bad public relations for libraries of which they have divested themselves through the years.

Any library, regardless of type, has several distinct publics but it is the nature and complexity of these publics which determine its essential activities. Each program must be tailor-made to fit these particular publics. That much of the discussion of public relations pertains to the system of which it is a part, rather than to the tool itself, is a "take-off" point made in the opening chapter and accepted by each of the authors. It is then in the functions of special libraries, as affected by the organizations they serve, wherein one discerns differences as well as similarities in activities between them and other types of libraries.

Thus similarities as well as contrasts unite in providing the motivation for considering the subject independently. Yet at the same time one has the opportunity of equating them with the working concept of public relations outlined in the opening chapter. In doing this comes the realization that good will generated in any type of library builds good will for the profession as a whole and aids in attracting able persons to choose it as a career.

Since organizations vary greatly in both objectives and operations, diversification manifests itself in their libraries. It has never been possible or perhaps even desirable to follow a particular pattern. There are many special librarians who "start from scratch"—an opportunity which presents a real challenge. Even if the library has been organized previously, the special librarian, to a considerable extent, makes his own job. He can improve existing services and develop new services of value and, by anticipating trends, he can initiate the gathering of vital information in order to expedite service never before requested. Each of these factors is closely allied to good public relations.

Both the special library and its most important public, its clientele, are captive. The close personal day-to-day contacts make it possible for information to be provided for a project and, as the project develops, one can see how the information fits into a pattern of useful-

ness and finally its part played in the total result whether the result is one of success or of failure. This opportunity to observe the end use of information redounds in rare satisfaction to those responsible for its provision. The entire process of working closely with the clientele in raising group productivity provides an excellent climate for good public relations.

Another difference lies in the area of nonconformity. It has already been pointed out that special libraries vary; they are under no legal requirements to conform in services rendered although some standardization may be desirable and not altogether impossible in the future. Every decision made by the library has a public relations aspect which keeps it in harmony with its parent organization. Let some move be made which creates an unpopular reaction among some of its clientele and the library management soon learns about it. Immediate steps must be taken to repair the damage. On the other hand, a library which operates as an independent unit may never be made aware of the poor public relations aspects of a decision, for example, to close the library on weekends and evenings—the only time when working people can spend time there using materials for personal growth.

Related to this is the whole question of rules and their attendant inflexibility. Regardless of how many publics with diverse interests the special library has, it still has the advantage of being able to adjust its rules—always kept to a minimum—to the needs of its parent organization. Too many regulations can create bad public relations; if and when they are necessary they at least can be administered to avoid serious inconvenience. Or they can be changed. Or perhaps they can be done away with entirely. For example, if one regards a book or journal as part of the equipment for a research project, then consider the difference in attitude toward the library which allows loans for an indefinite period and one which requires return after two weeks or even a month. A project rarely ends in such a brief period.

The only sound first step in a public relations program is to "put the house in order," according to C. D. MacDougall in an earlier chapter in this issue. R. B. Harwell, whose article follows MacDougall's, agrees with this point when he says that such a program must first be properly fitted into the administrative pattern of the library. Even one of the earliest writers on the subject notes that public relations, like charity, begins at home. These thoughts all suggest that, in any discussion of the library's public relations activities,

Public Relations Activities of Special Libraries

one should begin with the library staff—first by delineating the librarian's responsibility to operate the library in such a manner so as to gain understanding of the clientele, to hold the confidence of management, to secure maximum productivity of the staff, and to gain good will generally—all in an atmosphere conducive to these ends.

A large number of our special libraries are of the so-called "one-man" type, wherein the librarian has complete responsibility for the entire operation. In this event, he is his own good will ambassador since contact with the library is solely through him. But as his organization grows, his public relations cannot always be on a personal basis even though the clientele has become accustomed to his particular touch. To keep pace with the growth of an enterprise, the library staff increases in number. Thus, it is incumbent on the librarian to develop responsibility for working within the framework of a coordinated program and to share common goals of the enterprise with the library staff.

In choosing additional staff members, it is the librarian's task to find talent—persons with inquiring minds who are informed, articulate, and well trained in the particular work for which they are needed. This may relate to the development of an entirely new service or it may be complementary to established activities which demand extension. However, an employee's attitude and performance are governed by what he finds "on the job." One cannot employ staff endowed with enthusiasm, initiative, loyalty, and devotion for specific tasks. These qualities must be developed, both individually and collectively, since they are the *sine qua non* of good public relations. So the librarian has both an initial and continuing responsibility to give real meaning and significance to assignments so the staff may view them in terms of themselves and the clientele, in fact of the organization as a whole.

Everyone in an organization, from the chairman of the board to the guard at the gates, is a potential client of the library. Although it is always a challenge to turn the random user into a constant one, the library staff members cannot focus merely on him or even on the inattentive (that is, those who never use the library); they must place the emphasis of information gathering and communicating upon the segments of the organization prepared to use services to the greatest advantage. With this as an objective, they can further aim at fostering good client relationships which are the most important factor in internal public relations, not only in establishing the free flow of in-

formation in and out of the library, but in maintaining confidence and understanding as well.

The library staff must ever be on the alert to know when special service is needed and when self-service will accomplish better results. Although, as individuals, many can be counted upon to express appreciation for aid and likewise let it be known when disgruntled, it is occasionally wise to survey objectively to learn if the clientele, as a whole, is satisfied with the *status quo* and if not, do something about it. The term clientele has been used deliberately rather than patrons, which term carries a connotation of patronizing. In contrast to the latter, Webster defines client as "one who employs the services of any professional man." Anything done to let the community know that a librarian is more than a mere keeper of books is good public relations for the entire profession.

Since the library exists for the benefit of the enterprise and therefore the bulk of activities are within its framework, there are also many other relationships to be taken into account, such as relations with suppliers. The library is often an important spokesman for the company but more often it is a silent partner in building public relations. Not all publics can be reached directly; some are reached only through aid given intermurally but, regardless of method, the impact of library service extends beyond its own four walls and even beyond the organization it serves.

Relations with publics in combination can be illustrated by action taken on a request which came to our library staff to develop an educational medium for sales service representatives in Latin America. The subject was the library service available in our organization, and whatever form was used to tell the story, it had to be small enough to carry in a brief case because of weight limitations of plane travel. A series of twenty colored slides was made showing library staff members providing information by means of reference work, bibliographies, interlibrary loans, microfilm, maps, special files, weekly abstracts, as well as routine circulation of journals. An appropriate script accompanied the slides which required a viewing time of fifteen minutes. By means of this audio-visual presentation our representatives were better prepared to tell of the careful search preceding development of company products and explain to members of the health profession they contacted how their questions could be effectively handled on a referral basis.

There is still another type of an organization's public relations for

Public Relations Activities of Special Libraries

which the librarian has direct responsibility. From time to time inter-library loans are negotiated, professional projects shared, or reference questions answered, all calling for an exchange of ideas or materials. Working relationships thus established through contact with other librarians must be carefully nurtured; they broaden information resources not only in the local area but scattered throughout the country as well. An important by-product is the opportunity for the library staff to play an effective part in the development of sound public attitudes toward the organization as a whole. Another benefit of professional contacts made through the exchange of facilities and talent is the impetus given to staff development and growth.

Special librarians have an obligation to cooperate in profession-wide projects within the limitations imposed by their own situations. For example, there was the occasion this year to participate in plans for National Library Week—a challenge to the entire profession to relate the program to all types of libraries. Help in promotion was offered to our staff by the Indiana State Library which cooperated with the State Citizen's Committee and the Steering Committee for the project. When concrete plans were presented, our own management was eager to help us by providing plant-wide bulletin board space for colorful posters; special slogans for use in postage meters for out-going mail; double placards, or "tents," for use on tables in the plant cafeterias; bookmarks and flyers for items circulated both by plant libraries and our public library extension service; and space in employee publications. Thus, through concerted efforts, we were able to take part in National Library Week at a minimum of cost, time, and effort.

This discussion indicates the essentiality of good will as an asset of special libraries in their relations with publics—as many publics as there are distinct combinations of people with whom libraries communicate—either directly or indirectly. Since emphasis has been placed on the need for such activities rather than on the how of their execution, a classified list of media and techniques is appended. Regardless of methodology it would be difficult to convince a special librarian that there is any substitute for effective communications, excellent service, correct information, and unusual initiative in building a sound public relations program; nor would many admit that there is anything particularly new in the field. If indeed there is, it is the recognition that special librarians are becoming increasingly aware of their responsibilities to the profession as a whole; they are experimenting with development of personal qualitative standards

for librarians; urging improvement in library education, and cooperating in recruitment on a nation wide basis—all strong elements in good public relations.

Checklist of Media and Techniques for Public Relations Activities in Special Libraries

I. Numerous media exist, in addition to the usual communications in person, by telephone, and in memoranda, which can be used effectively such as:

- Weekly library bulletins
- Feature articles in house organs
- Use of plant-wide bulletin boards
- Moving pictures of library operations
- Tours of library for all new employees
- Bookmarks to announce new materials
- Effective brochure introducing the library
- Library corner or column in company newspaper
- Attractive formats for bibliographical compilations
- Pictorial posters showing information center in action
- “Reading as a Hobby” exhibit at annual hobby shows
- Information section in handbook for new company employees
- Explanation of library service in organization procedure manual

II. Some techniques are:

a. *With clientele who depend on the library*

- Attention to specific interests
- Bibliographies on any subject
- Assistance with editorial problems
- Display of company news releases
- Cheerful consideration of criticisms
- Careful consideration of recommendations
- “Extra touch” such as a comfortable chair
- Aid in acquisition of personal library items
- Suggestions for binding of personal periodicals
- Presentation of library service at a research seminar
- Duplicating and/or copying machines available in library
- Suggest classification schemes for personal information files
- Reproduction of tables of contents of important current journals

b. *With management*

- Material for talks
- Daily intelligence digest
- Indexing company publications
- Annual reports summarized to one page
- Provision for employee’s recreational reading
- Participation in company’s educational program
- Preservation and organization of company archives

Public Relations Activities of Special Libraries

- Advice in classification of personal book collections
- Cooperation in the plant-wide public relations program
- Good working relationships with library committee members

c. With the library staff

- In-service training
- Staff manual kept up-to-date
- Cooperation with management
- Handle exhibits as staff projects
- Communicate effectively and clearly
- Invite ideas for library bulletin boards
- Staff participation in employee activities
- Staff meetings in which members participate
- Encourage additional educational preparation
- Bulletin board for exclusive use of library staff
- Suggest contributions for professional periodicals
- Man the station library maintained by local public library

III. Media and techniques useful outside the organization are:

a. With professional colleagues

- Exchange of duplicate material
- Attendance at professional meetings
- Adherence to rules of other libraries
- Visits to library facilities in the area
- Cooperation with professional projects
- Participation in National Library Week
- Report help gained through interlibrary loan
- Arrange for professional meeting in company library
- Consultation regarding library development in the area

b. With potential library employees

- Library summer work-study program
- Vocational talks to high school groups
- Acquaint library schools in the area with library
- Illustration of library in company's recruiting folder
- Annual open house for students interested in library work
- Keep colleges informed of successful careers of their graduates

In using this checklist it should be kept in mind (1) there are several overlapping items in the above categories; (2) not every library will find it practicable or even desirable to consider all of them; and (3) many of the suggestions may already be incorporated not only in programs of special libraries but in those of other types as well—school, college, and public.

A fuller discussion of this subject will be found in the author's Chapter XII of *Technical Libraries, Their Organization and Management* (ed. by L. Jackson, New York, Special Libraries Association, 1951) now undergoing revision.