



Developing a Library Public Relations Program

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THE ART OF PUBLIC RELATIONS is not new for it has been practiced ever since the beginning of time. At an earlier date, it was probably known as "understanding" or "getting along" or "good will" or even "putting your best foot forward" and "doing good and getting credit for it." It was only when it became a science, some twenty odd years ago, that it came to be considered, by some, as a mysterious, wonder-working short cut that could solve any problem and produce any desired effect. The term, unfortunately, has also often been used, without real meaning or understanding, to describe flash-in-the-pan publicity stunts and programs that smack only of press-agentry and nothing more. This may account for the suspicious or cynical eye with which some people view what they, incorrectly, term "public relations."

There are many definitions of public relations but one of the most succinct was formulated by two experts in the field, J. H. Wright and B. H. Christian, who said: "Modern public relations is a planned *program of policies and conduct* that will build *public confidence* and increase *public understanding*."¹

In analyzing this definition it becomes readily apparent that there are three important words to be considered. The first is "planned." An effective program has to be planned. It cannot be sporadic. It must be a continuing function that is in operation not only day by day but year after year. The second word is "policies" and this implies the direction in which an agency is moving and will move, the aims and extent of services, the manner in which it cooperates with opinion forming groups and the position it occupies or hopes to occupy in a given area or community. "Conduct" is the third word and this refers to the behavior of an entity in the social pattern as well as to the

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behavior of everyone associated with it from top management down through the ranks.

Public relations is often referred to as a management function. This is true, to a certain degree, for policies are set by management or the administrative officers but it is the staff or the employees who carry out these policies. One cannot function without the other. A good program of internal relations is the base on which good public relations are built. An employee or staff group that works harmoniously, with an understanding of the objectives and the methods by which these objectives are to be accomplished, is of the greatest importance.

A good program of internal relations begins with the employees—all of the employees. Their attitudes affect cost, efficiency, and service but their effect does not stop there. They also influence consumer and community attitudes and help to shape public opinion.

After examining the real fundamentals upon which good public relations are built one comes to the realization that no organization or institution can function, fully and successfully, without putting these fundamentals into practice. Libraries must apply these principles to merit public understanding and support. Only then will people make the maximum use of resources and services and provide adequate support, for libraries of all kinds and sizes.

Libraries have been practicing public relations for years but in the postwar period the library's responsibility to the community or group it serves has grown enormously. In a rapidly changing world, libraries are faced with many new and different kinds of competition, not only in the areas of service and communication, but also in the areas of finance and personnel. Social, scientific, and economic changes have brought a host of new challenges as well as problems. Often, the very existence of a library depends upon how well it meets these changes. Because of these conditions, it is advisable to take a long look at the existing public relations program in every library to determine whether it is adequate, and if it is not, how it can be improved.

Such soul-searching is common in industry and merchandising and is often accomplished by means of surveys, polls, interviews, and research studies. Most libraries can neither afford the time nor the money for such large-scale projects. A simple method has been devised, however, for agencies who wish to conduct their own surveys. It requires a certain amount of time and an even greater amount of honesty on the part of the administrative officers, which include the board of trustees or directors and the librarian. Department heads

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and staff members are invited to participate, at some point in the program, and make valuable contributions to the whole.

These are six questions to be asked and answered when evaluating an existing library public relations program:

1. Is there anything wrong with the activities of this institution?
2. Is there anything wrong with the objectives of this institution?
3. What is our policy toward the public?
4. What policies have caused misunderstanding, if any?
5. Have we done everything we can to promote good will?
6. How much does the public really know about this institution?

Some of these questions apply specifically to public relations and others apply to internal relations and these, of necessity, must be answered and discussed first, for good public relations thrive only on good internal relations.

After the institutional aims and objectives have been subjected to the searchlight of truth it may seem feasible to adopt an entirely new plan, or new ideas and planning may be added to those parts of the existing public relations program that have proved to be sound and productive. Any plan should be elastic enough to meet changing attitudes and conditions. Some aspects of every program will be concerned with long-term usage and others will be adopted for short-term usage. An ideal library public relations program does these things:

1. Evaluates public attitudes and public needs.
2. Forms policies and procedures identified with these attitudes and needs.
3. Explains policies and problems to its publics.
4. Develops programs and services that will earn public understanding and support.

Evaluating public attitudes and public needs is the library's first responsibility. It must know what people in a given community or area need to help them lead fuller lives and to help them meet everyday problems in the home, the school, at work, and in their social environment. Generalizations about people's needs are known to most librarians. They know that the first desire is for security. People want to know how to raise their families, how to acquire and keep a home, how to better themselves financially and socially, and how to understand and get along with other people. Their secondary interests

include hobbies, group activities, and leisure-time pursuits. But one cannot generalize about attitudes. These cannot be taken for granted. A librarian must know what the people in his community are thinking and how they feel about almost everything. This knowledge can be acquired only by personal contact with people and groups at all levels. In the past, some librarians have been accused of living in an ivory tower but every progressive librarian knows that such a state of isolation is not possible in modern society.

Policies and procedures are developed after the evaluation of public attitudes and needs has been completed. A willingness to help and work with both the individual and the group and to encourage interest and participation in library activities is the first step toward gaining public understanding and support. The fact that a library has anticipated and met the needs of an individual or a group soon becomes common knowledge. Word-of-mouth publicity is a powerful force that costs nothing and is often more effective than many high-priced publicity campaigns.

Publicity is the tool that is used to tell the story of the library and to explain its policies and problems to its publics. It is *not* the purpose but an important tool of public relations that is used to create an intelligent, informed, and favorable public opinion. Much of the success of any institution depends on the process by which people are kept informed. The publicity family is a large one and includes newspapers, magazines, films, radio, television, photographs, special programs, public speeches, exhibits, books, book lists, reports, posters, publications, special events, meetings, and that all important word-of-mouth publicity. Libraries use publicity to gain or retain financial support, advance salaries, influence political action, get public sentiment behind a budget plea, promote good will, obtain gifts of books and money, spread information about library facilities, increase circulation, build up reference use, interest definite groups of people, promote attendance, direct people to the library and dozens and dozens of other large and small projects.

Publicity techniques are not difficult to master and many libraries have learned to use the methods and media once regarded as the sole property of business. Librarians have learned, too, that there is no hocus-pocus about writing releases for newspapers or spot announcements for radio and television. There are certain basic techniques to be followed and these can be learned with the help of books plus careful study of the publicity outlets in each community. In

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recent years, some librarians have made use of planned programs and publicity materials with considerable success. Many feel the subscription cost of these materials is far less costly and more effective than what they are able to produce themselves, at a like cost.

Many libraries enlist the cooperation of individuals and groups to help publicize services and policies. These may be within the library framework, such as a group of libraries pooling materials and talent for newspaper and radio news or for displays or booklists. Individuals and groups out of the library framework might include the Friends of the Library or the local gas and light company or newspaper editor, or the display manager of a department store or anyone else who helps to publicize the library, either directly or indirectly. Many libraries reach a wider audience more effectively and economically because of interest and cooperation on the part of individuals and groups who have already been "sold" on the library.

While a library has an active educational mission it cannot stop at providing suitable books and maintaining a competent staff just for the casual visitor. A library must be more than a mere purveyor of books. Special programs and services that will earn public understanding and support are the concern of many libraries. A large library may possibly sponsor a dozen such programs while a smaller library may concentrate on a single program. Some of the special services and programs that have been successfully developed by libraries in recent years include work with teen-agers, older adults, shut-ins, new citizens, parents, businessmen, and newcomers to the community.

No program, however, is undertaken without careful consideration of the needs and interests of the community or area the library serves. There would be no point in sponsoring a Great Books program in a community where the people need desperately to learn and understand the English language, just because a library somewhere else has undertaken such a program. It would seem equally foolish to undertake an elementary course in the English language in a community where people had long since mastered the tongue. This not only applies to programs but to services, also.

Some special programs and services are worked out with the assistance of interested individuals and community groups and are cooperative in nature. This, often, takes much of the pressure of time and work from the library staff and at the same time, creates the best possible kind of public relations.

Who can say how much good public relations will cost a library?

No one can budget public relations. It is an intangible that is part and parcel, bone and sinew of every organization and institution. One library may have thousands and thousands of dollars to spend on personnel and resources while a smaller library may have one-tenth as much at its command. But the smaller library may have the better public relations because the librarian and the staff have learned that having a lot of money does not guarantee good public relations. Public relations is an individual thing. It expresses the personality of a library. Public relations is a slow-building process which calls for attention, tact, and a consideration of every day matters. In other words, it is a program of service.

References

1. Wright, J. H., and Christian, B. H.: *Public Relations in Management*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1949, p. 3.