Bookmobile Publicity and Public Relations

SARAH L. WALLACE

"It was coloured a pale, robin's egg-blue, and on the side, in big scarlet letters, was painted:

R. Mifflin’s
Travelling Parnassus
Good Books for Sale
Shakespeare, Charles Lamb, R. L. S.
Hazlitt, and All Others”

That is Christopher Morley’s description of a bookmobile of sorts, the Parnassus-on-wheels, which led Helen McGill off on her adventures.1

Although most respectable librarians would shudder at the inconsistency of R. Mifflin’s author entries, many have followed his example and made their bookmobiles colorful, moving advertisements of books and library service. If that were the answer, this article could end here, the editors of Library Trends could find good use for the extra pages, and librarians could send their robin’s egg blue or canary yellow or cardinal red bookmobiles bouncing over the roads, their publicity problem solved.

In talking to librarians, bookmobile or otherwise, it becomes apparent that the distinction between publicity and public relations is a foggy one. One will report that printed flyers will solve his public relations problems. Another prefers television programs. A third leans toward radio spot announcements. Librarians who consider good posters the prime elements of a public relations program are not quite as common as they used to be, but they still exist. This confusion is not characteristic of the library profession alone. Indeed, so closely are the two related—public relations and publicity—it is often difficult for the professional to place the proper tag on each.

Erasmus and Sam Johnson agreed that definitions are hazardous.

The author is Public Relations Officer, Minneapolis Public Library.
He who has studied logic, however, has learned that the best way to progress in any discussion is to begin by defining terms. If one can get beyond that stage one has a basis for agreement or intelligent disagreement. The dictionary, in its usual obscure fashion, defines public relations as “the activities of a corporation, union, government or other organization in building and maintaining sound and productive relations with special publics such as customers, employees, or stockholders, and the public at large, so as to adapt itself to its environment and interpret itself to society.” Publicity, on the other hand, has been defined as the “state or process of bringing to public notice by announcements (aside from advertisements) by mention in the press, on the radio, or any means serving to effect that purpose.”

The important thing to remember is that public relations is the larger operation and that publicity is contained in it. Publicity wins a public with which the “corporation, union, government or other organization” to use Webster’s all-embracing list, can have relations. Someone has said that public relations was doing good and getting credit for it. The “getting credit for it” is publicity’s role. It is this interdependence of public relations upon publicity, and of publicity upon public relations which makes it difficult for a writer to outline practices, problems, and panaceas and for a reader to follow a pen which draws too fine a line between the two. For the purpose of this chapter, therefore, let us admit that the problems of public relations are frequently solved by publicity, but that publicity must operate within the framework of planned public relations.

Before beginning any organized campaign, a good public relations man will assess the assets of his client. The prime asset of the bookmobile is that it has glamor. The thought of a truck full of books, rolling over highways and rutty country roads, wheeling over roadways lined by the first spring flowers, by apple-filled orchards, by pastures of peaceful cattle, by winter-bound farms, warms the layman’s heart. He thrills to the thought of the adventure, information, entertainment, instruction on those shelves; the words of “Shakespeare, Charles Lamb, R. L. S., Hazlitt, and all others,” which find their way to hamlet and town, by means of the bookmobile. The editor and the reporter, the sophisticated, syndicated photographers and columnists, warm much more quickly to the story of books going out to people by means of a four-wheeled van, than people coming to books waiting in some brick and pillared building.

A second asset, related to the first, is that the bookmobile attracts
curiosity seekers. A man who will walk by a branch library, permanently fixed behind its clipped shrubbery and gold lettered doors, a man who will drive by his city library on a busy downtown corner and never know what “that building is” will stop to go through the book bus he sees parked on a corner, in a shopping center, or at a country fair. They stop and shop, and frequently buy.

Thirdly, the bookmobile advertises itself. With any reasonably legible legend it will tell the man on the street as it passes him by that this is part of a certain public library, that it carries books, and that the books are available to a borrower.

Every librarian worth his salt boasts of close personal contacts with his customers. Every branch library has the long-standing patron who brings a box of candy to the staff at Christmas; every subject department has the courtly gentleman who brings flowers wrapped in brown paper and string to the “girls”; but only the bookmobile librarian is invited regularly for stewed chicken and dumplings “when you come this way next month,” who carries home a jar of strawberry preserves along with the recipe, both given to her by the cook in berystained apron, who left her fragrant stove long enough to return the books borrowed last month and select replacements. Most stationary librarians see their patrons in various styles of attire depending upon whether or not they have stopped at the library on their way to a tea, the grocery store, the beach, or their business. Only a bookmobile librarian serves a suds-topped reader who has come out with soap in her eyes because the truck arrived while she was washing her hair. Indeed, a bus-borne librarian does get to know the patrons in a highly personal light.

The problems claimed by bookmobile librarians in explaining poor or limited public relations programs are not so distinctive. Not only do most bookmobile librarians, decrying their own plight, echo other bookmobile librarians; they also echo librarians in other types of libraries.

They grieve over crowded conditions pointing out how this hampers good service, the most important factor in good public relations. A glance through any group of annual reports, whether of village, county or city, public or special or school, libraries will show that this is as common a malady among libraries as a virus infection in a classroom in February. The same is true of the problem of a limited book collection. True, the bookmobile—in both space and size of collection—has the problem underscored, by the very nature of its operation. By
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the same token, it is easier for their public to understand the problem, to sympathize with it, and to accept it.

Common to most libraries also is the third complaint: lack of understanding of its function by the general public and by governing bodies. County commissioners who ask, “Will people really use this kind of library?” are echoed by city councils and boards of finance who query the wisdom of an expanded budget for a new service. Publics who expect everything from a bookmobile have cousins who use a branch library with the same expectation. Ones who expect nothing pass by both the bookmobile and its fixed sister. Bookmobile librarians look for a way to show the public that it exists for adults as well as for children; that its service is not a juvenile one only. So do other librarians who, while proud of their children’s collections and their story hours, would like some recognition of the fact that the children who have been taught to read and use books when young do not lose that desire and ability when they come of age. Both plead that they exist for the business man as well as the schoolboy; the homemaker as well as the child; the teacher as well as the student; the coach as well as the player.

All libraries bemoan lack of time and lack of staff to do public relations work or to carry on a publicity program. They have no time to write news stories. They cannot get away to give talks, to set up exhibits, to visit groups. While this is true of all libraries, it is perhaps aggravated in the case of a bookmobile librarian who feels the pressure of perpetual motion, envying the colleague who can at least stand on firm ground at a fixed point. The one complains that he cannot get “in” to plan his program; the other claims he cannot get “out” to carry it through.

A sixth grievance—also common to other libraries in this modern era of rapid and far-reaching communication—is the overlapping between areas of publicity and areas of service. A radio or television station covers two neighboring cities and perhaps three or more counties. An announcement about the bookmobile service of one is taken by residents of all the areas as applying to theirs, for, as the director of one county library says: “Each bookmobile user has a personal interest in his bookmobile and thinks it is the one and only.” Experience has shown that this is true of libraries on firmer foundations than rubber tires. A metropolitan library announces that it will close because of an emergency and its neighbor in the big city across the boundary finds itself without customers. Announcement of a new
service or a relaxation in rules on the part of one city library will cause a run on the other libraries through the state. Bookmobiles may suffer more from this last point than other types of agencies, since the peripatetic quality of the bookmobile prevents its being on the spot to answer questions and correct misinformation.

Likewise, bookmobile directors point out that they need capable, well-trained, outgoing librarians to build good public relations as they roll along from stop to stop. Other library directors are also crying for capable, well-trained, outgoing librarians to build their public relations. Again, the theory, proved so many times over, that good service and individual personality build good public relations, is known to all alert librarians. All are seeking the best for their own institutions. On the other hand, bookmobiles may have more cause for complaint in their field than others. There has been a tendency in some areas to believe that anyone who can drive a truck with four speeds is a good bookmobile librarian. Public relations-wise it should be remembered that for good bookmobile service a knowledge of authors is as important as a knowledge of carburetors.

Three problems, however, are the bookmobile’s alone. The first is parking. The library secure with cornerstone and mailbox never has to wonder how to let its patrons know where it will be today. Bookmobiles do. On one hand they may meet resistance when they attempt to establish a stop. Merchants have been known to object to such a big vehicle pre-empting parking space at a business center. In a residential area, homeowners are the objectors. In the second place, when a bookmobile finds it impossible to park in its usual place it loses business. Even when it merely turns a corner or moves up half a block, its customers, creatures of habit, cannot locate it.

Most librarians also wail about their time schedules—too little of it to do so much—but bookmobile librarians have the more serious reason for complaint. They cannot be detained too long by a patron at one point; spend too much time hobnobbing with the newspaper editor in a certain town; or halt to give an impromptu lecture to a visiting delegation of important officials. To do so means that the faithful borrowers at the next stop stand in the rain, their faith, their enthusiasms, and their loyalty wilting along with their hair; or, they go back home muttering imprecations against the hardworking librarian who, in attempting to build public favor at one stop, is losing it at another.

Libraries in buildings are subject to emergencies, it is true. Roofs
are lifted by the wind, basements flood, fires break out, but whatever it is something remains to show what happened. If he misses the news in the paper or on a broadcast, when a borrower arrives, library card in hand, he finds the evidence and usually, in addition, a sign and/or a staff member to explain why service is disrupted.

These, then are the problems a public relations counsel would discover from a survey of bookmobile directors: crowded conditions; limited book collections; lack of public understanding; lack of time to promote public relations, foster publicity outlets, create a continuing publicity program; lack of staff; overlapping between publicity and service areas; personnel; parking; rigid schedules; and emergency stoppage of service.

What are the solutions? Among individual efforts bookmobile librarians have found most successful have been posted announcements, talks, newspaper pictures and stories, cooperation from local sources, television and radio broadcasts, printed flyers, and demonstrations at fairs and festivals. Over and above all these, giving force and substance to each, is that most important public relations factor, good service. This is the library's product—service—and just as a firm must have a good product to advertise, so must a library have good service to publicize.

Two curious things present themselves. While all librarians resent any implication that they are not giving good service, most will tell you how much better it could be if certain conditions—space, staff, budget, collection—were improved. With this understood, it is safe to point out that all of the above "successes" are activities (1) which they list their inability to do under the heading of problems, and (2) which are common to fixed as well as rolling libraries—even demonstrations at state and county fairs.

Progressive bookmobile directors realize that one of their greatest needs is a continuous, coordinated professional publicity program in place of the spotty if enthusiastic one that must be added to an already overcrowded schedule. Others, pressed by immediate needs, list as important the missing parts of the whole which are affecting them most at the time: need for well-produced printing and more of it, door-to-door distribution of bookmobile literature, adaptation to bookmobile use of the materials issued for small libraries.

Most readers picking up such an article as this expect a startling new cure for their ailments. Salk vaccines, insulin, penicillin—such discoveries are not everyday occurrences in the medical world. Neither
are new cures for library ills. By and large, librarians must treat their public relations and publicity problems with tried and true remedies. But as in the use of all remedies, their effectiveness depends upon their application.

In facing the bookmobile’s problems these things must be kept in mind: (1) The patient’s troubles are not his alone; they are suffered by other kinds of libraries, and (2) All the pains are symptomatic of malnutrition caused by lack of time, staff, and money. Although the word has become a tired one in the last few years, cooperation in liberal and frequent doses should bring relief.

Cooperation between all types of libraries and librarians is the first avenue of attack. This is compounded first of understanding within the profession itself. Although few bookmobile librarians mention it in their replies, it is true that the work of bookmobiles is frequently undervalued by other librarians. This arises, of course, from the deep-seated urge of the earnest librarian to see that every borrower has available to him full library service—reference resources, film programs, discussion groups, reading rooms, listening rooms, puppet shows, the satisfaction of shelf after shelf of books unlimited by the dimensions of a truck body. So anxious are they to have bookmobile patrons realize what they are missing, they fail to see what those patrons are getting.

Bookmobile librarians, on the other hand, must be conscious of the fact that librarians under immovable roofs also face pressures, know their patrons, and serve them well. Sold themselves on all aspects of library service, librarians can forget their own selfish promotions and work on selling the profession to the world. If library associations would ignore the sectional demands of their memberships for a period of years and work on an information campaign to show the public what libraries are, what they can do in this age of space and conflict, their importance in American life, their indispensability, their support of the citizen in his public and private life, and their own need of public support from the citizen, much would be accomplished. This takes money and it takes unbroken constant hammering away at the public consciousness.

A good publicity or advertising campaign is not a matter of an ad or two, a speech or two, and then silence. Too often, library associations, faced by a legislative campaign or similar emergency, hire a publicity agent for a few columns of newsprint during the months the legislature meets. They print several hundred folders and dis-
tribute them at public meetings. They write letters and they button-hold senators. Heaven bless them, they frequently get the measure passed. But what happens? The publicity, the educational campaign is dropped, and the grass roots support that had taken a fair hold is soon choked with weeds of neglect.

A continuing campaign, however, integrating local, state, and national efforts would consolidate the progress made on all fronts. One of its aims would be the realization by the public of the glowing image in the word “library”—one that embraced all kinds of library service. National Library Week, and to a certain extent, Book Week, have contributed to library prestige. They have been especially valuable because of the nationwide publicity they have achieved. But libraries have been too content for too long to depend upon spotty, sporadic coverage which emphasizes a detail rather than the whole portrait.

Such contentment is ill advised. The bookmobile librarian who asked for a continuous coordinated professional publicity campaign was wise with a wisdom that the profession as a whole should have. Imbued with such wisdom, librarians would hold a clear idea of who they are and what they do. They should have just as clear an idea of the picture they want to present to the public of what they are and what they do. They will want to present it in a continuous coordinated fashion, as a complete work, not in the bits and pieces of national weeks, occasional stories, isolated campaigns which make a jigsaw puzzle, slowly fitted together and perhaps never viewed as a whole by a single person.

If the profession, associated on the national and the state level, launched this continuing professional campaign it would not only add strength and stature to the local library; it would also inspire each one to go and do likewise on its own level.

How is this done? Local libraries—be they in bookmobiles, buildings, what you will—can hire an expert to do their printing. They can get someone to write their newspaper stories, or work out a radio or television series. They may even set up a billboard or two. This solves the problem of time and staff by getting someone else to do the job. It does not solve the lack of sufficient funds for a sustained program, for knowledge and experience, purchased on today’s market, come high. Neither does it succeed in producing the proper picture. Again, it is one that is painted in spots, producing a distorted image.

Ideally, there should be a single theme uniting news stories, billboards, television and radio programs, and printing. It should go
further and influence the letters that are written, the way a staff answers a patron, the manner in which complaints are handled. Intelligent public relations counsel will provide the theme. It will supply the experience and knowledge to do the jobs which now seem difficult. It will organize them so that both staff and time are used to the best ability.

All that is lacking now is money. Libraries have done a fairly successful job of county and regional cooperation in establishing library service. This is what has put bookmobiles on the road from one end of the United States to the other. Needed now are county and regional public relations programs where libraries band together to hire the professional skills they need. With pooled funds they can afford the counsel they must forego as individuals. Cooperation in the preparation of lists and other promotional materials done in quantity printings; news stories that need little alteration to adapt them to individual differences; radio and television announcements reaching the whole area of service and telling a unified story; talks given by the best speakers in the library pool for all the libraries in the pool and scheduled to secure systematic coverage; all these can be planned by the professional to impress a single dominant idea of library service. Over and above, his advice would be available to each library for specific needs peculiar to each—a new building for headquarters, a bond issue, an intensive juvenile reading promotion.

Just as they join finances to hire the skills they need, so may libraries have to cooperate on rules, regulations, schedules, and minor operational procedures, so that their stories can be told jointly in a more economical and effective fashion.

To illustrate: Three libraries operate bookmobiles in three neighboring counties. One starts its winter schedule after Labor Day; another on September 15; the third, on October 1. All of them announce their changes on the radio. All their patrons, and sometimes the radio stations, are confused by this multiplicity of bookmobile schedules. As the librarian quoted above declares: “Each bookmobile user has a personal interest in his bookmobile and thinks it is the one and only,” so what follows is a grand one-two-three among the triad of counties with people in all of them waiting at the wrong stops on the wrong days. If the three had cooperated on a public relations counsel they would have been advised to change hours on the same date. Cooperation in operations would have achieved this; cooperation on publicity
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would have reached the public. Good service would replace confusion.

To sum it up, regional cooperation on library service puts bookmobiles on the road. Regional cooperation in public relations and publicity keeps them there.

References