

# Library Public Relations: New Opportunities in a Growing Field

---

ALICE NORTON

## Introduction

MOST CAREERS IN PUBLIC relations include a number of job changes. Some changes are from one employer to another (perhaps to self-employment); others are from one specialty to another within the field or related fields. It is not surprising then that public relations, an atypical career within library management, offers a staff member opportunities for job changes, frequently with rewards.

This article describes some of these current opportunities and identifies some trends in the field. First is a brief overview of the beginnings of public relations and a sobering look at its present status. Then four major trends in library public relations are identified and some career opportunities are described within and outside of libraries.

No organization (including libraries) without a public relations *plan* can have an effective public relations program. In fact, most definitions of public relations include a reference to planning. For example: "Public relations is a planned program of policies and conduct that builds public confidence and increases public understanding."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, planning is one of the four widely accepted steps in the management function of public relations. The steps are: fact-finding and research, planning, action and communication, and evaluation.<sup>2</sup>

What then should a library administrator expect from public relations staff? Activities should include: continuous assessments of the

---

Alice Norton is owner and operator of Alice Norton Public Relations, Ridgefield, Connecticut which services libraries and related organizations.

attitudes and opinions of the library's publics (including users, potential users, groups from which the library gets its support, other opinion leaders, and the media); a planned program of communications with these varied publics (each program tailored for its particular market); and evaluation of results.

### **Actions, Past and Present**

In American public libraries, it appears that success traditionally has been accompanied by imaginative, energetic promotion. Almost a century ago, John Cotton Dana, director of the Denver Public Library, introduced innovations in services (such as the country's first separate children's room) and aggressively promoted library use by newspaper staffs, club members, teachers, and the business community.<sup>3</sup> Several decades later in Baltimore, Kate Coplan, while serving as publicity assistant to Joseph L. Wheeler, director of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, installed library exhibits in the windows of vacant downtown store buildings. When Pratt built its new main library in 1933, it contained the thirteen massive department store style windows in which the library displays its wares; highlights noteworthy events, issues, and local organizations; and gains city-wide attention and support.<sup>4</sup> Among today's many innovative public libraries is the one in Plainedge, New York which uses direct mail to carry messages to groups with similar interests, such as senior citizens, single parents, and, in cooperation with the schools, to parents of gifted children.<sup>5</sup>

Early accounts of academic, school, and special library development contain less about the promotion and marketing of libraries than do reports on public libraries. Recent library publications, however, offer advice (and good examples) on the promotion of all types of libraries.

### **Survey Findings: Lack of Planning**

What is the state of library public relations in the mid-1980s? National library periodicals contain articles on library promotion. Library conferences offer a variety of programs on communications and public relations. A growing number of medium-sized public libraries, and a few pioneering academic libraries are adding to their staffs public relations positions. And mass-media coverage of libraries in the press, radio and television is growing.

Although these increases in library public relations activity appear encouraging, a 1983 national survey revealed that the foundation for

## *Library Public Relations*

this activity is generally shaky. To prepare for a speech on the evaluation of public relations at the 1983 American Library Association Conference, Frank W. Wylie made a sample survey of 100 randomly selected academic libraries and public libraries serving populations of 50,000 or more. (Wylie, a former president of the Public Relations Society of America, is director of public affairs at California State University in Los Angeles.) Wylie learned from the survey:

- Only 58 percent of the libraries have a public relations program.
- Of those with a public relations program, only 19 percent have a formal public relations plan, 30 percent do not include the promotion of the library usage as part of their program, and only 21 percent measure results against objectives.
- Less than one-third of the libraries with public relations programs include library-city relations and donor relations as part of this responsibility

Wylie found it “alarming” in this time of “economic scarcity and imperiled budgets that more library public relations programs do not give high priority to the twin tasks of fund raising and donor relations.” Wylie urged all libraries of every size immediately to develop a public relations program with a formal plan and specific objectives. “Public relations,” he said, “is no longer an optional activity for a library.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Prescription for Improvement**

If library administrators would study Wylie's findings of libraries' needs and follow his counsel, the number of libraries with well-planned, effective public relations programs could grow rapidly. This would require: administrators who understand public relations principles and identify feasible results, experienced public relations staff (full time or part time), and good service by all members of a library staff which is the basis for a good public relations program.

### **Trend #1: Increased Library Cooperation**

But even before library administrators have time to respond to Wylie's alarming findings, a trend spotter can find some encouraging signs. Most important of these is the recent growth in national library cooperative efforts. Both the American Library Association (ALA) and the Library of Congress (LC) have launched major projects which, with the active participation by librarians throughout the country, have helped increase public library use. These national agencies have also

gained the support (including major funding) from corporations and mass media including network television.

In 1982, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) gave one of its prestigious Silver Anvil awards to ALA for four major public information programs. They were: National Library Week; a "Call Your Library" publicity campaign to promote inquiries to libraries by phone; the first national library newspaper *Openers* (the purpose of which is to encourage borrowing); and a syndicated radio show "About Books and Writers" developed with National Public Radio to tie in with the "About Books" syndicated ALA book review column." Sharing credit for this success are the public relations office staff and membership committees of ALA and the staff of the Public Relations Board, the public relations firm from which ALA contracts for services.

During her 1981-82 term as ALA president, Elizabeth W. Stone chose public awareness of libraries as the theme. Among the year's accomplishments were: the issuing of a library postage stamp, the adoption of a logo to identify libraries, and the plans for the creation of a Business Council for Libraries. The council gained operating funds in 1983.

In 1984, National Library Week (NLW) began a new partner's campaign to involve selected national associations more aggressively in NLW's year-long public information campaigns.<sup>8</sup> ALA has collaborated with McDonald's, Polaroid and other corporations to plan promotion of library services using these firms' products. Participation by individual libraries in the campaigns is voluntary.<sup>9</sup>

The Library of Congress's Center for the Book is now in its fifth year of collaboration with CBS television on the "Read More About It" program. Well-known performers appear on the screen after television specials to recommend books on related topics and suggest that viewers borrow from their local libraries. The performers have included Christopher Reeve, Cicely Tyson and Mikhail Baryshnikov. A new LC program, "And Now...Read About It," will encourage museums to incorporate reading lists into exhibitions.<sup>10</sup>

Another encouraging trend is the emphasis on public relations in the Special Libraries Association (SLA). In 1983, Special Library Association's members ranked public relations second among the six priorities the board of directors had adopted.<sup>11</sup> SLA gave staff support to this function by creating the new position of public relations officer and appointing Martha Johnson to fill it. SLA used its seventy-fifth anniversary year (culminating in June 1984) as the national focus for communication about the association and the field of special librarianship.

## *Library Public Relations*

Activities included production of a ten-minute videotape to show the resources and services libraries and information centers offer.<sup>12</sup>

Regional and statewide cooperative promotional programs could effectively reinforce these national programs and focus on regional services and needs. Such programs are still not universal. Among the notable exceptions, however, is the Council for Florida Libraries. In that state, librarians and citizens work together to produce materials and activities for use by public libraries. The council itself also promotes libraries statewide. Media used to communicate library messages include: pamphlets, buttons, stickers, posters, newspaper articles, radio and television public service announcements, and billboards. An early Florida campaign adopted the National Library Week "get your facts straight" theme and conducted a statewide campaign with a federal Library Services and Construction Act grant.<sup>13</sup>

In Pennsylvania, the state library has sponsored effective campaigns to promote public libraries. The 1982 campaign using the slogan, "We have the answers," co-opted the support of other state agencies and corporations.<sup>14</sup> In a third state, North Carolina, almost every public library sponsors a summer reading program using one theme statewide ("Just Open a Book" in 1982) and materials the state library supplies.<sup>15</sup>

In other regions and states, libraries work together on successful promotional campaigns. In 1982-83, encouraging actions were the creation by three state libraries of new public relations officer positions.<sup>16</sup> Generally, however, the potential for state and regional public relations cooperation is still unrealized.

### **Trend #2: Libraries Add Staff Specialists**

In addition to cooperative public relations programs, a second promising trend has been the recruitment of specialists in public relations and related fields for library staffs. One response to the economic recession of the late 1970s was an emphasis on fund raising by many libraries. In 1978, the Brooklyn Public Library created the position of director of development and public information and appointed Irene Moran to fill it. Moran, who had directed public relations at the Brooklyn Public Library and another major library, gained expertise as a fund raiser through attending seminars and workshops. Since then, the library has had noteworthy success in raising funds on many levels. (The library already had a national reputation for its public relations program.) "Buy a Book for Brooklyn," patterned after charity appeals, used direct-mail appeals to Brooklyn residents, and even coin canisters

in libraries to collect contributions. The library also solicited corporate and foundation support.<sup>17</sup>

The Branch Libraries of The New York Public Library gain vocal political backing from citizens for increased financial support from city and state governments. Professional fund raisers on the library's staff work with volunteers to raise money for the privately supported Research Libraries through glamorous special events and other activities. In 1983, the library netted \$217,000 when 95 prominent New Yorkers were hosts and hostesses at \$150-a-person dinner parties, most held in homes. (The event yielded publicity as well as money; ten *New York Times* reporters covered the dinners.)<sup>18</sup>

Academic libraries have traditionally relied on college and university fund raising departments to secure gifts for libraries from alumni and friends, and from foundations and corporations. A 1983 study by the Systems and Procedures Exchange Center at the Association of Research Libraries revealed, however, that academic libraries are increasing their role in fund raising. At least four of the 95 libraries had created a new position of fund raiser the year before.<sup>19</sup> The Stanford University Library is one of the academic libraries with a full-time library development officer.<sup>20</sup>

Few special libraries, with the exception of some in the federal government, are large enough for full-time public relations. Recently, the Smithsonian Institution Libraries created the position of assistant to the director for resource development. Initial responsibilities for Mary R. Rosenfeld, who was appointed to the new position, were the supplying of public information to staff and scholars (the two main groups of library users) and the development of fund raising strategies. The most successful of the new activities is the regular schedule of lectures and seminars for the library staff and the academic community. The office is also helping plan a campaign to raise funds for a library building.<sup>21</sup>

### **Trend #3: Adoption of Marketing Practices**

In addition to the growth in cooperative public relations and the addition of specialists to library staffs, a third promising trend in library promotion is emerging. This is the intelligent use by a few libraries of the practices and techniques of marketing. (Unfortunately, some librarians without an understanding either of the principles and practices of public relations or those of marketing use the two terms interchangeably to mean any type of promotion.) Philip Kotler, a leading marketing

### *Library Public Relations*

theoretician, teacher and writer, defines marketing as: "the effective management by an organization of its exchange relations with its various markets and publics." The best known classification for the variables in this process are the "four Ps": product, price, place, and promotion.<sup>22</sup>

The Baltimore County (Maryland) Public Library has been a leader in the use of some of the marketing practices Kotler describes. Among them are: market analysis; purchase of quantities of materials to meet current demands; placement of library units in areas of high traffic, such as shopping centers; and book displays in the style of retail stores.<sup>23</sup> Que Bronson, a branch librarian at the Anne Arundel County (Maryland) Public Library, has analyzed successful commercial retail methods of display and adapted these practices for libraries.<sup>24</sup>

The Denver Public Library, which has had a well-staffed public relations operation for decades, recently incorporated marketing into its administration. Over the past few years, the library has coped with the national economic recession which has weakened the resources and services of most large urban public libraries. The Denver library also suffered from inadequate financial support for the services it provided to suburban residents whose taxes (local or state) did not contribute to the library. In 1983, the library began the introduction of a marketing program recommended by a staff task force which had worked on the project for a year. The task force recommended that the library: seek more public and private financial resources; develop products and services for specific market segment needs; organize and staff a marketing operation in the library; and develop a communications program. As director of marketing, the library recruited Suzanne Landrum whose previous experience included marketing for a national brewery, raising funds from corporations for public broadcasting, and development work for a college. The responsibilities of the new marketing office encompass public relations, internal communication, market research, and development.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Trend #4: Use of Consultants and Outside Firms**

Finally, a fourth trend in library public relations and marketing is the increase in the use of specialists for free lance or consultant work. ALA's public relations section provided libraries with one way to tap this resource by producing a directory of library public relations workshop consultants. The listing of twenty-nine persons includes library staff who take on assignments in addition to their full-time positions

and a few self-employed public relations specialists. In addition to planning and directing workshops, many also can supply public relations services.<sup>26</sup>

A related trend is the increasing use by libraries of firms to conduct bond issue election campaigns and to direct fund-raising campaigns for capital improvement. A branch office of the Ketchum Communications Company, a national public relations and advertising firm, conducted a successful fund raising campaign for the Jacksonville (Texas) Public Library.<sup>27</sup> Ketchum's Philadelphia office donated advertising staff time and paid all expenses for a Friends of the Library campaign to recover long overdue library books. The campaign, using an imaginary character named Morton who was chained to his overdue books, resulted in recovery by the library of 160,000 books.<sup>28</sup>

### **Career Opportunities within Libraries**

Changes in the operations and staffing for the library public relations function offer career opportunities. Candidates for these new positions may be persons now employed in libraries, library school students with previous experience in these fields, or public relations and marketing specialists employed in fields other than libraries. Opportunities also exist for library staff for whom public relations or marketing is not a primary specialty. Most library public relations activities require the collaboration of many persons. Among the activities a library staff member might help with are: gathering information to assess opinions and attitudes; helping to plan and produce printed guides, promotional pieces, displays, exhibits, and audiovisual media such as slide/sound shows; and working on programs and special events.

A library staff member who wants to gain expertise in public relations would be wise to seek advice from library administrators to identify skills needed by the library. Then, the prospective public relations officer should gain knowledge and experience in these areas through reading, participating in seminars and workshops, and volunteering for related work in community organizations. A good source of information for self-education is the annual bibliography of books and journals the Public Relations Society of America publishes.<sup>29</sup> PRSA also cosponsors seminars and workshops for nonmembers in some major cities. Publicity clubs and universities with library schools or public relations departments are other sources of education.

Before making a major investment in time and money, however, the potential public relations staff member should analyze his or her

## *Library Public Relations*

abilities and potential for the field. Among the requirements for success in public relations and marketing are: the ability to gather facts, plan, and organize; an understanding of individual motivation and the political process (whether within a small department or in the workings of a city); excellent communication skills; and energy.

A library degree is not a requirement for carrying out effective library public relations work. Some libraries may, however, establish double job qualifications by requiring the chief public relations officer to have a library degree. In other cases the library degree may not be a stated requirement but administrators and library boards may give preference to candidates with these degrees.

To gain expertise in the field of fund raising from individuals and corporations and in seeking grants from foundations or governments, the library staff member can tap a variety of sources. Among them are: the Foundation Center and its regional library collections; the Grantsmanship Center which sponsors training workshops and publishes printed guides; books and periodicals on fund raising and grant writing; and workshops and seminars sponsored by academic institutions and associations.<sup>30</sup>

The library staff member who possesses or acquires public relations skills increases his or her value as an employee. New opportunities—especially for the person who is able to move to a new community—will undoubtedly continue to increase. Examples of some recent career opportunities can be a useful guide. While working in an accounting firm's library, Anne A. Heanue gained public relations skills and was chosen for a position in ALA's Washington office where she is now assistant director. The Louisiana State Library recruited experienced radio and television producer Sue Fontaine as its public relations officer. She later was public relations director first for the Tulsa City and County Public Library and then for the Washington State Library. She now holds that position for The Branch Libraries of The New York Public Library.<sup>31</sup>

### **Career Opportunities Outside Libraries**

Public relations training and experience also can be a springboard from library positions to those outside the field. Penny Yost went from a public relations position in a Texas library cooperative to a position with the Dallas Convention Center. Diana Stotler was assistant public relations officer at the Ferguson Library, the public library in Stamford, Connecticut, when Colt Industries hired her as manager of corporate communications.<sup>32</sup> After directing the graphics department for the West

Virginia State Library, Carole Bryan opened her own graphics firm. Part of her firm's work is for libraries, and Bryan produces for a national library audience a graphics and public relations monthly newsletter entitled *The Library Imagination Paper* (see appendix with this and other related resources).

### Lifelong Opportunities

The field of library public relations offers an additional benefit beyond increased job opportunities within libraries and in other organizations. For the person who wants to continue work after retirement, it offers skills which can be put to a variety of stimulating uses. In 1956, Louisa Ward Arps, a librarian and writer, helped create and appeared on a thirteen-week television series on local history sponsored by the Denver Public Library. The series launched the city's new public television station. Arps later expanded the material from the series into a book, *Denver in Slices*.<sup>33</sup> In 1983, the out-of-print book was reissued in both print and in a new taped edition for the blind and physically handicapped. Meanwhile, Arps has retired from her library position, but she still researches and writes Colorado history.<sup>34</sup>

### References

1. Wright, J. Handly, and Christian, Byron H. *Public Relations in Management*, 1st ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949.
2. Cutlip, Scott M., and Center, Allen H. *Effective Public Relations*, 5th rev. ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982.
3. Sabine, Julia. "Dana, John Cotton." In *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, vol. 6, edited by Allen Kent and Harold Lancour, pp. 417-23. New York: Marcel Dekker, 1968; and *Public Library Hand-book: The Public Library of Denver*. Denver, Colo.: Denver Public Library, 1895.
4. Kate Coplan to Alice Norton, personal conversations, 1959-1984; and Averil J. Kadis, letter to Alice Norton, 20 Jan. 1984.
5. Joseph Eisner, Director, Plainedge Public Library, to Alice Norton, personal communications, 5 Oct. 1982 and 24 May 1983.
6. "Public Relations Evaluation...Myth, Option, or Necessity?" Keynote address at program of the Public Relations Section of the Library Administration and Management Association at the American Library Association Conference, 25 June 1983 in Los Angeles. Unpublished manuscript of address. (The entire program on two cassettes—#83107-091 and #83107-092—is available from ALA.)
7. Dardenne, Peg. "What is Arachibutyrophobia? Silver Anvil Case Study." *Public Relations Journal* 39(May 1983):36-37.
8. Elizabeth W. Stone, Ph.D., chair, National Library Week Committee, to Alice Norton, personal correspondence, 2 Nov. 1983, 15 Jan. 1984, 24 March 1984, and 2 April 1984.

## Library Public Relations

9. Barber, Peggy. "National Library Week—A Few Words from the Sponsor." In *Persuasive Public Relations for Libraries*, edited by Kathleen Kelly Rummel and Esther Perica, pp. 167-72. Chicago: ALA, 1983.
10. Cole, John Y. "'Read More About It' Launches Fifth Season." *LC Information Bulletin* 42(3 Oct. 1983):341-44 appendix; and \_\_\_\_\_. "From the Exhibit Wall to the Bookshelf." *LC Information Bulletin* 42(14 Nov. 1983):388-90, appendix I.
11. "Association Long-Range Plan." *Specialist* 6(Sept. 1983):1.
12. Martha Johnson, news release issued by Special Libraries Association, 13 Dec. 1983.
13. Joan Erwin, Coordinator of Community Relations, Orlando Public Library, Orlando, Florida, to Alice Norton, campaign materials and correspondence, 28 March 1977; and "Report on the Council for Florida Libraries 1983 John Cotton Dana Public Relations Awards." *LIPP: Library Insights, Promotion & Programs* 8(Aug. 1983):1.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
16. Wells, GladysAnn. *4th Annual Report from the States 1983: White House Conference on Library and Information Services*. Albany: State Library of New York, 1983.
17. Irene Moran to Alice Norton, personal communications, Jan. 1984.
18. Walton, Mary. "Gregorian Unbound." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 8 Jan. 1984, magazine section, p. 13.
19. "Fund Raising in ARL Libraries" (issue theme). *Association of Research Libraries SPEC Kit 94*(May 1983).
20. Susan Getman Abernethy, former Library Development Officer (currently on staff of Stanford's main office of development) to Alice Norton, personal communications, 27 June 1983, 10 Jan. 1984.
21. Mary Rosenfeld. Speech given at the Seminar on Public Relations for Library and Information Service, Catholic University, 11 June 1983; and Mary Rosenfeld to Alice Norton, personal communications, 16 June 1983 and 11 Jan. 1984.
22. Kotler, Philip. *Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations*, 2d ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982.
23. Davis, Kenneth C. "The Selling of the Library: Baltimore County System Challenges Assumptions About Library's Role." *Publisher's Weekly* 216(13 Aug. 1979):26-28; and Charles Robinson to Alice Norton, personal communication, 8 Jan. 1984.
24. Bronson, Que, and Stone, Holly. *Materials Display Manual*. Annapolis, Md.: Anne Arundel Public Library. (This publication may be ordered from: Anne Arundel County Public Library, 5 Harry S. Truman Parkway, Annapolis, Md. 21401. The manual is 25 pages, illustrated and is available for \$6.50, plus \$1.15 for postage/handling to be prepaid.)
25. Denver Public Library. "Marketing Task Force: Report and Recommendations," 61-page report for staff use), May 1982; Richard G. Akeroyd, Jr., assistant city librarian, Denver Public Library, to Alice Norton, personal conversations, 9 July 1982, 26 June 1983; Cayton, Colleen. "Daring to be Different: The Denver Public Library." *Wilson Library Bulletin* 56(March 1982):504-10; Henry G. Shearouse, Jr., City Librarian, Denver Public Library, to Alice Norton, personal correspondence, 20 Jan 1984; and "Denver PL is Free Again to all but Boulder County." *American Libraries* 13(Nov. 1982):615.
26. Library Administration and Management Association. Public Relations Section. *Library Public Relations Workshop Consultants*. Chicago: ALA, 1982.
27. "Fundraising Firm gets \$526,405 for Jacksonville, Texas Library." *Library Journal* 108(15 Dec. 1983):2292.
28. Keith Doms, director, Free Library of Philadelphia, to Alice Norton, personal communication, 8 Jan. 1984.
29. The Information Center, Public Relations Society of America. *Bibliography*.

## ALICE NORTON

Annual (prepaid): \$3 for members; \$10 for others. Order from: PRSA, 845 Third Ave., 12th floor, New York, N.Y. 10022.

30. The Foundation Center, 888 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019; and The Grantsmanship Center, 1031 S. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, Calif. 90015.

31. Sue Fontaine to Alice Norton, personal communication, 16 Dec. 1983.

32. Diana Stotler to Alice Norton, personal communications, 5 Jan. 1984.

33. Arps, Louisa Ward. *Denver in Slices*. Denver, Colo.: Sage Books, published by Allan Swallow, 1959; Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1983.

(The author, then public relations officer for the Denver Public Library, worked with Louisa W. Arps on the production of the series.)

34. Louisa W. Arps to Alice Norton, personal correspondence, Jan. 1984.

## Appendix

### PUBLIC RELATIONS RESOURCES

Titles of many books and articles are included in the Reference section of this article. Some additional library public relations resources are included below.

*Example of article on public relations for special libraries:*

Pertell, Grace M. "Selling the Business Library." *Special Libraries* 72(Oct. 1981):328-37.

*Example of public relations for academic libraries:*

Edinger, Joyce A. "Marketing Library Services: Strategy for Survival." *College & Research Libraries* 41(July 1980):328-32.

Rummel, Kathleen Kelly, and Perica, Esther. *Persuasive Public Relations for Libraries*. Chicago: ALA, 1983, 199p (twenty-two practical articles on effective library public relations and marketing by library staff, library school faculty, and library consultants, all specialists in the field; with bibliography).

Among the general national library periodicals that regularly carry news items and articles on library public relations in all types of libraries are:

*American Libraries*, *Library Journal*, *School Library Journal*, and *Wilson Library Bulletin*.

Two newsletters that contain only articles on library public relations and promotion and have public and school libraries as their primary audiences are:

"The Library Imagination Paper!" published quarterly by Carol Bryan Imagines, 1000 Byus Drive, Charleston, West Virginia 25311.100

"LIPP: Library Insights, Promotion & Programs," published about nine times a year by Deja Vu, P.O. Box 431, La Grange, Ill. 60525.

*Library PR News* published bimonthly by Library Educational Institute, Inc., R.D. 1, Box 219, New Albany, Pa. 18833.