PROGRAMMING AS PUBLIC RELATIONS

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"… If the circus is coming to town and you paint a sign saying "Circus Coming to the Fairgrounds Saturday" that's advertising. If you put the sign on the back of an elephant and walk it into town, that's promotion. If the elephant walks through the Mayor's flower bed, that's publicity. And if you can get the mayor to laugh about it, that's public relations."

-As reported in Reader's Digest[1]

The statement above shows the many ways of conveying information to the public. Ironically, this example is built on the original event of a circus coming to town and does not define the event itself as a public relations function. For any of the following activities to take place, there must first be a circus to advertise. For libraries, a circus is always coming to town, whether it is the form of an author visit or a basket-making class. Libraries provide endless programming to their communities, yet many struggle through the communication processes to promote these events. They often fail to see that the program itself is the best form of public relations available.

For any organization, every encounter with the public is considered public relations. For libraries, the possibilities are endless. Every time someone physically visits the building, the organization's Web site, reads a newspaper article or sees a television news report, an impression is made. It's easy to take advantage of each of these opportunities to reach a predetermined goal – resulting in good public relations.

More and more libraries are hiring individuals to oversee this process. Our titles may vary, but the expectation is often the same: Build a bridge with the community we serve. One tactic in our public relations toolbox that is often overlooked is special event planning. In fact, most libraries do provide programming for their community. Why do libraries do this? Is it a reference function of sharing information? Perhaps. I would argue instead that most programming which libraries host is public relations based. Unfortunately, many libraries do not treat their programs as a public relations function, and thus, miss a great opportunity to make strong community impressions.

This article will attempt to uncover the possibilities available to the savvy library public relations department from the initial planning stages through the evaluation process.

PLANNING

At Anderson Public Library, the Community Relations Department is required to host six community events each year, not an uncommon situation. Libraries often set goals of numbers of programs to be hosted in any given year without really defining what is hoped to be accomplished by doing this. Whether it is the responsibility of reference, community relations, or the children's staff, being deliberate about what the programs will accomplish is essential to success.

When planning these events, it is easy to simply cast about for general ideas, past successes, or easy-outs without considering public relations aspects. When coming up with a program idea, it is good to consider the following:

♦ **Will this program promote materials and services the library currently offers?** Examples here could be hosting a financial planning workshop to promote the library's collection of materials on that topic.

♦ **Does the program answer a community need?** Often, choosing a "hot topic" can create media coverage and frame the library as center of community information on that topic.

♦ **Does the program reach out to a specific target audience?** What age group will you find in the seats at your event? Will it help promote the Children's Summer Reading Club or bring more teen-agers to the library? Will it reach affluent customers who usually travel to the bookstore instead of the library?

♦ **How many people will this program bring to the facility?** Obviously the more the better in this instance, and while number cannot always deter-

mine good programming, it is a fact that the more people a program brings through the doors, the more impressions have been made.

♦ **Will this program conflict with community groups, which the library would like to work with?** This can be as basic as not planning a wedding fair at the same time as the Holiday Inn, or looking toward the perceived impact the event could bring. A "Murder @ the Library" program at Anderson Public Library brought surprising recriminations from the local Victims of Homicide Support Group, a situation that could have been avoided with additional forethought.

♦ **Does this program fit into the overall public relations plan and goals of the organization?** This planning tip may go without saying; however, it can help to stem some unnecessary programming. Doing programs that do not help further the goals of the library can drain time and resources better directed at programming that *can* make an impact.

IMPLEMENTING

When putting a program together, it is important to see the public relations opportunities that exist along each step of the way. Once an idea has been formed and measured against current library goals, the real work begins. In the implementation phase, authors are contacted, committees formed and promotion planned. These areas offer multiple opportunities to the savvy program planner.

When contacting the author or presenter of the program, it is important to make a good impression. Remember: each contact with the public is considered public relations, and good public relations revolve around making sure those contacts leave positive impressions. Through past experiences, I have learned that visiting presenters may be far more detail-oriented than you might expect. Any failure to have all the correct information available when requested will leave a negative impact with your guest. Before calling the speaker, have a few details on hand so that you present yourself as an organized planner.

♦ **Have specific dates for the program in mind that do not conflict with any other local events that might draw away the audience.** An example is the time I offered a local history program on the same evening the Historical Society held their monthly meeting. Immediately I forced 75 of my best audience members to choose between their own organization and a library event. You might easily guess which event won their attention.

♦ **Have a time in mind for the event, and a reason for choosing that time.** Examples include plan-

ning the program on a Saturday morning to target an older population who will not drive after dark, or offering a late-afternoon program for school-age children.

♦ **Be ready to explain the goals of the program, including attendance.** This will help the presenter prepare for the crowd intended.

♦ **Assure the presenter that you have an information packet ready to send.** This should include maps and directions, confirmation of the time and date of the event, and library background information. Additional information such as target audience, co-presenters, or program sponsors will only add to your organized image.

Because authors and program presenters are often prominent figures in the community, the impression you create with them will spill over into their organizations and sphere of influence. Many an author has exclaimed to friends "They don't know what they are doing down there at that library," simply because they were frustrated by a lack of information or expectations from the beginning of the program.

Above: The Murder @ the Library program at Anderson Public Library was highly successful, in part due to the participation of many influential community members. Pictured above are local university professors,ministers, and the school superintendent, all members of the event cast.

Another aspect to consider in program implementation is the formation of committees. For many program planners this seems like an unnecessary step that will ultimately be more trouble than it is worth. The key is to see the public relations value in committees. Membership is the most important aspect here. Think about the audiences you would like your program to reach, and then consider what community members are linked

to those audiences. Working to reach teen-agers? Invite the local high school newspaper staff to partner with you for the program. Planning a presentation on local history? Involve Indiana Room staff as well as members of the local historical society. Including staff members on committees offers its own set of benefits. Circulation staff involved in program planning will be much more likely to tell customers checking out materials about the upcoming event. Other benefits to this strategy include the following:

◆ Increased awareness of the program by the organizations involved.

◆ Increased linkage with community groups resulting in higher library usage by these groups and a base of rapport for future program planning.

◆ Multiple ideas generated by organizations tied closely with the program material.

◆ Possible use of organization resources in implementing the program, including funds.

Use of committees does not need to be as concrete as you may have experienced in the past. With the advent of e-mail, many details can be organized from individual desktops saving time while still delivering the aforementioned benefits. Committees can be very small by including only one representative from the organization, or very large, depending on the size of the planned program. Do not forget that these individuals can be put to work, as long as the work is well thought and presented in an organized manner. Do not ask the President of the local Lions Club to make copies for you; but instead, ask him for a list of members to whom you might mail a flyer. Use the strengths of the people collected in this way, and program quality and attendance will grow.

Planning promotion is an essential part of programming. Too often programmers fall back on "the usual" and simply create a flyer and send a press release. Do not neglect to think through the various avenues and opportunities available to you. Although the program itself is considered a tool of public relations, the promotion – the bulk of public relations - is how you will get customers to attend and therefore leave with a good impression of the library. Think through program goals when considering your promotion. Your target audience becomes very important at this stage. By looking at shared communication sources of various audiences, new and different promotional techniques reveal themselves. For example, a literary program may be of interest to the creative writing listserv at the local university or college. Or a program teaching storytelling techniques can be marketed to the Indiana Storytellers Organization. Use the Internet to your advantage by visiting an organization's website where it may be

possible to collect member email addresses and send out information to very interested individuals with little cost or effort. This easy promotion is the most effective.

Above: For a recent Renovation Celebration, key community members were invited to attend with special candybar messages hand delivered by library staff.

By narrowing down the focus, the promotional message can become much more tailored to the person receiving it. The same storytelling workshop promoted to storytellers as a networking event, can be promoted to local Parent-Teacher Association members as a child-involvement technique. Both groups will be more interested in attending than if they simply had received a generic flyer with basic information. Consider the following techniques for reaching unique target audiences:

◆ Uncover organizational listservs by visiting Web sites of companies and clubs in your area, and even statewide if the program merits the search.

◆ Ask local clubs that may have an interest in your topic if you may speak at their monthly meeting. If this is not possible, try sending flyers to group members or organization leaders.

◆ Many organizations publish newsletters or magazines and often seek information to include. If you have something relevant, it is usually only a matter of finding the right contact person.

◆ If you are targeting a broader group, such as women between the age of 20 and 45, consider places the audience is likely to visit and then work to get your message out in that location. For women, perhaps it is the local beauty salon; for teens, the movie theater is often effective. Building partnerships with these types of organizations in the committee stage can help ensure access in the promotion phase.

Promotional efforts will leave an impression with

the people who receive them. To ensure it is a favorable one, check for spelling and grammatical errors, even if you are just sending an e-mail to the president of the local sewing club. It is a known fact in media circles that submissions containing errors immediately cast doubt on the organization sending it. In fact, this is the quickest way to lose credibility with the media. The same is true with every programming activity. Each contact is an opportunity for good public relations. The items listed above will take more time and effort than what might usually be done, but in most cases will cost little. Choose the best audiences to target, and focus on getting the message out to them instead of trying to reach everyone and not penetrating special-interest groups.

EVALUATION

Evaluation is the most often neglected step of program planning, yet it is an essential function of public relations. Generally, evaluation involves looking at program goals to see if they were met, and reviewing techniques used in planning and promotion.

The easiest way to get started in evaluating programs is to ask for audience feedback. Anderson Public Library uses a generic form about the size of a postcard. It is given to anyone attending any library program. It has spaces for program name and date as well as room for comments from participants. The form also tracks promotion by offering check boxes. Participants hear about programs through many information avenues including a friend, flyer, or newspaper, to name a few. The card tracks the ages of those attending and collects names and addresses for addition to the library mailing list. Gathering this information is helpful, but to be truly useful it must be turned into evaluating statistics. After each program, the ages and information sources of attendees are tracked and recorded in a monthly report. This report shows growth over time of the use of certain information avenues, as well as overall

growth of monthly program attendees.

In addition to this kind of quantitive information, program planners should spend some time reviewing the various techniques used in implementing the event. The following questions should be answered and recorded for future program planning use:

♦ If a committee was used, what members were beneficial and what members did not contribute? Who else could have been asked to become involved?

♦ What target audiences attended? Which communications were the most effective in bringing them to the event? Which target audiences did not attend? Was the presenter's message, or the way it was delivered a factor?

♦ Was the time spent with a particular target audience worth the number of attendees it garnered?

♦ Did the program promote library services or materials? If not, how could it be adjusted in the future to do so?

♦ What was the general community reaction to the topic? Were any negative impressions made through the program?

♦ If conducting this program in the future, in general, what should be done differently?

The three stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation listed in this article do not, of course, address all aspects of program planning. What is hoped is that this information will guide readers to view programming as a public relations function and begin to explore the possibilities presented in this ordinary library activity.

Programming for public relations is really about becoming deliberate with the activities that we are

Name of program: _____

Date: _____ City you live in _____

How did you hear about it (check all that apply?__ newspaper __ friend __ flyer

__ Web site __ @Your Library (library newsletter) _____ other

Suggestions/comments regarding this program: _____

_____

Suggestions regarding Anderson Public Library's programming (what you'd like to see, etc.):

_____

Age (optional): under 18 __ 18-34 __ 35-50__ 51-65__ 66+ __

Please check if you would like to receive notification by mail of future programming. __Yes
(please print name and address on back.)

Would you like to be notified by e-mail? __ Yes

E-mail address: _____

Above: Anderson Public Library uses an evaluation card to track program attendance and successful promotion.

planning for our communities. By identifying our target audiences we can use programs to reach out to segments of our community who do not normally use their libraries. Once they visit to attend a class or special event, it is far more likely they will revisit and perhaps acquire a library card.

NOTES

[1] As quoted in *Promoting Issues and Ideas: a Guide to Public Relations for Nonprofit Organizations*. 2nd ed. by M. Booth Associates, Inc. New York, NY : Foundation Center, 1995, p. xiii.

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