

Public Relations

DAMAGE CONTROL

by Carol Bredemeyer

One of the downsides to public relations—and one of the reasons public relations professionals are consulted—is damage control. Businesses confront damage control to deal with issues such as tainting of or tampering with consumer products. No profession seems to need damage control more than politics. However, librarianship is not immune. Articles by Nicholson Baker in *The New Yorker* have left libraries in general, and the San Francisco Public Library in particular, struggling to put a positive “spin” on the issues aired in the articles.

Recently, one of our colleagues, a law firm librarian, posted a caution to members of the law-lib listserv. His use of the listserv to obtain information in an unfamiliar area came back to haunt his firm in its pursuit of a new client. A rival law firm had done a Web search using his firm’s name and the subject matter as search terms, found the posting to the listserv, and claimed that someone from our colleague’s firm had made a statement to the press indicating they were ignorant of a major resource in the field. (I’m sure when we post messages to law-lib none of us thinks we are making a statement to the press, but that’s a story for someone else!) While perhaps not on the same level as a national product tampering scare in the sphere of our lives, our jobs may be on the line if we have irreparably harmed our organization or provided incorrect information to our library users.

Many small happenings can lead to a librarian’s need for damage control: unpopular policies, a rash of personal property theft from patrons, photocopiers or computers that are broken more than they work—anytime our services are not available as they should be. How do we deal with these situations? We will rarely have the opportunity to hire public relations professionals to help us.

Most law librarians, in any type of library, work with a library committee. The library committee can help shape a response to problems. The committee’s status as a governing or advisory committee may affect how much and what type of help

you get. Members of the committee may serve as a liaison to groups or individuals affected by a particular situation.

Another solution is the *mea culpa*. Take the blame, say you’re sorry, cut your losses, and move on. Remember the West Group *mea culpas* at the CRIV Open Forum in Baltimore? Of course, you can’t use this method too often—if you’re seen as always making mistakes you have to apologize for, you probably won’t have a job for too long in that organization.

Meet with the aggrieved group or individuals. This might be the Student Bar Association or a particular practice group in the firm. State your reasons for what has been done—sometimes patrons don’t understand the background behind a policy or don’t realize that you have no control over things such as the photocopier contract. Be careful not to be defensive or lose your temper. You will need to be extremely well prepared for this meeting. Arm yourself with statistics and facts. Show that there is a basis for your reasoning other than just your opinion. In addition to solving the problem at hand, perhaps you can set up mechanisms to avoid similar situations in the future (e.g., perhaps you can persuade the students to bring their complaints about the library to a librarian instead of going straight to the dean).

Of course, the best damage control is on the front end. When we implement new policies or technologies, careful thought before implementation can prevent some of the need for damage control. If we think about what can go wrong and try to deal with those issues ahead of time, we may save ourselves some grief. Law-lib has been a great help in this area. We can ask our colleagues about problems they have had in situations we are heading into. We have a wealth of talent in our profession and we have all learned new skills in our professional journeys—public relations is just one of those skills and we all use them at one time or another.

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