



Public Relations

SHOW YOUR STUFF

by Sue Burch

The Annual Meeting provides many opportunities for law librarians to share their wisdom, experiences, and new ideas. Attending one of our July conferences also means many days of networking and socializing with our colleagues while re-energizing our librarian spirits. But the conference has many other important functions. One of the most exciting is to provide a forum for AALL members to “show their stuff!” This event is truly a unique opportunity for our members to inspire and be inspired through the creative work of others.

The Early Years—PR and AALL

Public relations has not always been a top priority of our Association. The focus on PR began in 1990, when a special Committee on Public Relations was created by then President-Elect Penny Hazelton to “coordinate all public relations efforts of the Association with the support of the AALL Headquarters’ staff” (85 *Law Library Journal* 422). This two-year committee (1990–92) determined that our Association needed a public relations strategy and developed an impressive and detailed plan for implementing a PR strategy to jump-start what it hoped would evolve into a more permanent endeavor of the Association and its leaders.

Item 7 of the report made the following recommendation: “Create a public relations program for presentation at the 1992 Annual Meeting.” What evolved from that recommendation and the ensuing 1993 PR program in Boston was the PR Poster Session. This event was the brainchild of AALL’s first “PR Czar,” Frank Houdek. The Poster Session allowed law librarians to display successful public relations efforts found in all types of libraries. It enabled the law library community to examine creative PR projects that already

existed, and it evolved into a “show-and-tell” session that had as many advantages for the exhibitors as for the attendees.

According to Czar Houdek, “The first Public Relations Poster Session, offered at the 1993 Annual Meeting in Boston, was designed to provide an informal environment in which attendees could casually browse through a varied assortment of promotional materials and chat with representatives from the libraries and organizations about their marketing methods. Informality was stressed—no speeches, just highly visual presentations and ‘short from the hip’ responses to questions and comments from the attendees. The goal was to provide individuals who had developed successful ways to promote their libraries with an opportunity to show these ideas off to folks looking for inspiration on what to do in their own shops.”

This first PR Poster Session was actually put into a program slot that followed right after another PR-oriented educational program. The Public Relations Committee records indicate that “fifteen law libraries and two AALL Chapters displayed their wares and talked to people about their public relations efforts.” Despite the small numbers, there was great interest and enthusiasm to continue the program.

At the Seattle meeting in 1994, Czar Houdek proposed the “Public Relations Poster Session: The Second Coming.” Attendees got to check out the PR materials prepared by other libraries and speak with those involved in their creation. The success of that program paved the way for the 1995 Pittsburgh event. Peggy Fry (Georgetown University Law Center) and Hazel Johnson (now with Maguire Woods Battle and Boothe) organized the third annual PR Poster Session with a jazz theme. Their program abstract invited attendees to stop by and examine hundreds of examples of successful PR efforts, as well as to pick up many free samples of PR materials brought by participating librarians. The purpose of the PR Showcase was “to provide impetus and ideas for other libraries to implement public relations programs in their own libraries,” Johnson explained.

The PR Showcase—Come and Get It

At the 1996 Indianapolis conference, the PR Poster Session ceased to be an up-and-coming educational program but had now become a welcome fixture at the Annual Meeting. The event was moved to its

current permanent home in the Exhibit Hall Activities Area, and representatives from academic, state, court, law firm, and other libraries scheduled specific times to discuss their PR campaigns, answer questions, and provide samples of their creativity.

From 1996 to 1999, PR Poster Sessions have been held at each Annual Meeting. The PR Showcase in ‘99 featured print and electronic products. Computers demonstrated Web sites next to a display of the catalog and poster of a library exhibit featuring rare children’s law books. A database designed for sharing library expertise within a library consortium stood next to the story of how library chairs came to be replaced in one library—complete with one of the replaced chairs to sit in while reading the story. Innovative, imaginative PR tools come in all shapes and sizes, digital or paper-oriented. The showcase has become a way for members to do what they do best: share information, ideas, and resources no matter the format. We all know the old librarian adage, “Bring food and they will come.” The same adage, with a twist, applies to the PR Poster Session. “Bring your PR tools, and they will come.” What you’ll receive, either as an exhibitor or an attendee, is immeasurable.

Janice Shull (Law Library of Louisiana) provides some insight into how her steady customer habits at the PR Poster Sessions have paid off handsomely with fresh ideas for promoting library services at her library. At the first Public Relations Potpourri in 1992, she picked up every library brochure on display. Back home in New Orleans, she took a critical look at the design and content of each brochure and then created targeted brochures for her library’s different users (general public, the Friends of the Law Library, and judicial employees). She also designed a simplified, more readable map, using ideas from other libraries.

Recently, she has been collecting examples of training and marketing tools for online catalogs. When her library switched from a card catalog to an OPAC, she pulled out her “idea file.” From her collection of other librarians’ PR tools, she and the staff at the Law Library of Louisiana developed a publicity campaign, adapting methods used by other libraries—which included a trivia quiz, a prize for the closest guess on the number of cards in the card catalog, a “funeral” for the card catalog, name the catalog mascot contest, and flyers and public announcements in various media.

As a librarian who has become well known for her exhibits, Shull feels the real strength of her library's public relations comes from their topical exhibits. She has shared exhibit ideas and tips with many librarians and has learned from them as well. From her experience in creating exhibits and sharing the results at the PR Showcase in Indianapolis in 1996, she has presented programs and written articles. "Participating in the Showcase affords an opportunity to step back and evaluate your goals and methods of informing the public about your library's services," according to Shull.

The PR Showcase— Minneapolis 2001

Last year at the Philadelphia meeting, the PR Committee coordinated the millennium year time capsule project and the "History of AALL" exhibit. The PR Showcase was given a year off—but it's coming back this summer!

The PR Committee invites you to show and share your PR materials with your colleagues in Minneapolis. If we're to be valued as a proactive partner of our law schools, firms, courts, and the legal community, we need creative, appealing PR efforts to promote our libraries to our customers. We represent all kinds of libraries, organized and managed in different ways. However, we share a commonality. Our libraries must be valued to not only survive, but thrive. Effective public

relations efforts will keep us thriving, and the PR Showcase provides the perfect venue to help us find new ways to promote our libraries.

This is a members-only event. No vendors, no outside speakers, just law librarians. Do you have bookmarks? Pathfinders? Brochures? Posters? Maps of your library? Photos of your exhibits? Library newsletters? Copies of pages from your Web site? National Library Week materials? Legal Research Guides? Plans, pictures, details for a fund-raising event? Then we want YOU, and there are five good reasons for your participation in the PR Showcase:

1. Librarians share information and resources all the time. Why not our promotional materials? So, in July pack up those PR materials, share your marketing expertise in Minneapolis, and demonstrate for your colleagues creative ways to inform our customers about the good work we do every day.
2. This event is more fun than a "moonlight madness" sale! Everything is free and available on a first-come, first-served basis. Stop by and pick up your free stuff and get inspired by what you'll see. It's the perfect opportunity for those on the look-out for new marketing ideas for their libraries.

3. Meet new colleagues from all over the country—i.e., networking opportunities—and take advantage of their PR expertise and generosity. Not everyone is a creative genius, but we're all capable of being inspired and motivated. This is the place for that to happen.
4. The Activities area is the place to see and be seen while in Minneapolis. Come get noticed. And while you're at it, beg, borrow, and steal those public relations ideas.
5. It's your chance to "show your stuff" to thousands of intrigued AALL members who want to know more about your PR efforts.

For more information and to sign up NOW for a table at the PR Showcase, call or e-mail Joan Shear (617/552-2895 or joan.shear@bc.edu) or Lucy Curci-Gonzalez (212/415-8576, lcurci.gonzalez@morganfinnegan.com).

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Sue Burch (sburch@pop.uky.edu) is Associate Director of the University of Kentucky Law Library in Lexington, Kentucky.