

“C” Is for Communications

by Robert H. Hu

Public relations is essentially about communications — projecting a favorable image to the public. To reach this goal, the party carrying out the PR campaign will often use several communication vehicles to market, promote and advertise itself to the public it serves. Libraries tailor many of these media strategies to communicate with their specific users and publicize their services.

The Newsletter. Many libraries publish a regular newsletter and distribute it

distract the reader from the content. Editors and designers, however, do incorporate design surprises every now and then to keep the newsletter’s format from becoming boring. But keep those surprises to a minimum, otherwise they lose their impact.

Conservation is defined by a clean, professional look that adds to your newsletter’s marketing value. Don’t become enamored with your desktop publishing program’s bells and

their opinions about issues that affect the profession.

The Suggestion Box. A suggestion box is a common phenomenon in library land. A box made of wood or metal, with or without a padlock — and sometimes covered with dust — may not immediately strike anyone’s PR fancy, but the device can be a useful tool for communications. The immediate objective of having a suggestion box is to let the public tell the library how it feels about the library. When a user drops a note in the suggestion

box, he or she is sending a message to the library and expects something in return. When the library responds, it is addressing the user’s concern. Doing so engages the library in a dialogue with the user. When executed appropriately, such user communications can help the library build a favorable relationship with its public. Proper administration includes factors such as placing the box in a visible/accessible location; frequently monitoring it; and providing a timely, courteous response to user comments.

When Texas Tech University’s law library started a suggestion box last year, the students put it to good use. There were certainly complaints about the temperature, noise and bathrooms in the library. But the library also received plenty of good ideas for improvement, such as installing power outlets near the study tables so that students could use notebook computers in the library. The staff addressed each concern promptly. In return, the library received several thank-you notes. One student even brought cookies and candies for the staff.

As technology develops, the suggestion box may no longer be limited to a physical device. Some libraries — e.g., Emory University’s Web site at <http://www.law.emory.edu/LAW/library.html> — are



to their patrons and the general public. While most libraries do so for practical purposes — such as announcing changes in policies and procedures, recent additions to the collection, changes in staff, new program offerings and research tips — some fail to realize the value of the newsletter as a communications strategy. A well-edited and -managed library newsletter can be a powerful tool to promote the library to those it serves.

A successful newsletter must be informative in content, professional in design and consistent in delivery. The best newsletters adhere to four concepts: consistency, conservation, contrast and content, according to Lucy Curci-Gonzalez’s article, “My Excellent Adventure: Across the C’s of the Newsletter Design and Editing,” in the December 2000 issue of *AALL Spectrum*.

A newsletter’s editorial and design consistency is comforting to the reader. Maintaining the ratio of content to graphics and regularly using those graphic elements — headlines, text and clip art — will not

whistles. “Littering the newsletter with too many typefaces and graphics detracts from the content,” Curci-Gonzalez writes.

Contrast in newsletter design is essential to lead the reader through the publication, thus illustrating the content. Pull quotes, artwork and photos can initially draw readers to an article. Bold fonts in headlines distinguish them from the body of the article. Initial drop capital letters indicate where the stories begin. White space gives the reader a rest in a particularly text-heavy article. Sidebars should use different headline and text fonts than the main article.

The heart of any newsletter is content. Go beyond publicizing the usual library events and updates. Report on trends that have an effect not only on your library but the library community at large. For example, if your law library is implementing a new internship program, write about how it compares to other internship programs across the country. Profile your law library’s staff and patrons. Incorporate an editorial section in your newsletter to allow readers to convey

(continued on page 30)

already experimenting with a “virtual box.” No matter what form a suggestion box takes, it will succeed as a communications strategy only if managed properly.

The Web Site. Most libraries have Web sites although the design and information of these Web sites vary significantly. Typically a library site contains information about the library’s hours, online catalog, staff, program and service offerings, and links to other resources. Some Web sites allow searches and transactions, such as reserving books and making payment. In any case, a library’s Web site is its presence in cyberspace and may be a user’s first encounter with the library before seeing its physical facility and resources. Thus the library Web site stands as a great tool for the library to promote itself and build positive relations with its public.

A Web site that is well designed and maintained can cast a positive image of the library, draw repeat visitors from a larger community, raise usage in both of the virtual and physical resources, and strengthen public support for the library. One of my favorite sites is that of the College of William & Mary law library (<http://www.wm.edu/law/lawlibrary/>

[index.shtml](#)). Rich in content, the College of William & Mary’s Web site provides research and career guides, technology resources and other useful information. Yet the vast amount of content is well organized and kept up to date. The information is contained in a clean, elegant design that proves easy to navigate.

By contrast, a poorly designed, unkempt site may reflect negatively on the library. It may turn away potential users and eventually erode public support for the institution. Texas Tech University law school’s former Web site was unattractive: The home page was disorganized and boring. Much of the content was out of date, filled with many broken links. And there were no graphics at all. Many students and staff complained about the site’s lack of functionality and aesthetics. To improve the site, the library redesigned it with a more professional look. The content was updated and reorganized to improve the information’s usefulness. More buttons were added for easier navigation. The site used graphics, recognizing the importance of art in supplementing the text. The enhancements, which are still in progress, have enlivened the site and produced positive feedback from students, faculty and staff.

The potential impact of Web sites as a communications/marketing strategy is tremendous if the library is creative and adept in mastering the technology.

Choose One or More Strategies ... Other Resources

The newsletter, suggestion box and the Web site are only a few communication media that a library can use to conduct PR campaigns with the public. Sometimes one particular strategy will achieve the desired outcome; at other times, a combination of the strategies may be required to be successful. Each library must develop its own PR/communications plan to meet its particular needs and situation.

For more ideas, consult Lisa A. Wolfe’s *Library Public Relations, Promotions, and Communications: A How-To-Do-It Manual* (1997) and Suzanne Walters’ *Marketing: A How-To-Do-It Manual* (1992). Both are from Neal-Schuman Publishers in New York.

Robert H. Hu (Robert.hu@ttu.edu) is law librarian/head of public services at Texas Tech University Law Library in Lubbock.