

Taking Advantage of Friends: PR Benefits of Friends Groups

by Tracey Gray Bridgman

The rarest of all things in American life is charm. We spend billions every year manufacturing fake charm that goes under the heading of "public relations." Without it, America would be grim indeed. — Anita Loos (1888–1981), U.S. screenwriter, author and humorist. *Kiss Hollywood Good-by* (1974).

Law Libraries don't have billions to spend on "public relations," so why not rely on the generosity of Friends. — Tracey Gray Bridgman

When general and academic libraries want to raise funds and enhance their image, they often create Library Friends groups or Friends of the Library associations. General and public libraries have long embraced the concept of the Library Friends programs.

By comparison, such programs among law libraries are rare. When considering public relations and service initiatives, law librarians tend to focus upon the idea of targeting their immediate constituents — whether students, faculty, attorneys, legal assistants, judges or law clerks. The law library community is reluctant to implement such Library Friends programs. They require a perpetual commitment to fund raising, advertising, marketing, event planning, community outreach and institutional image-building to attract members for the ultimate success of the program. Almost anyone would justifiably shrink away from taking on the responsibility of a seemingly long-term and resource-draining commitment. However, a well-established Friends of the Library association offers many positive benefits and advantages.

The predominate purpose of establishing a Friends program is to raise funds to subsidize much-needed library projects and services. Academic and public librarians are more likely to benefit from such a group. Library Friends associations, however, offer much more than mere dollars. In addition to

the revenue raised through membership and fund-raising efforts, a library with a strong and sympathetic library board consisting of influential members can conceivably influence senior administrators. The board can assist in justifying library expenditures, such as expensive electronic databases, technological enhancements and more staff positions.

Government and private libraries can benefit from Library Friends activities by removing the fund-raising aspect of the program. Absent fund raising, many of the ideas and suggestions discussed here are easily adaptable and provide a foundation for numerous and viable variations on the Friends of the Library theme. Depending on its scope, a private or government library could create, for example, a Library Board, Library Executive Committee or Library Association that might consist of interested and sympathetic partners, professors, judges or alumni. A strong and dedicated advocacy group is an advantageous public-relations instrument for any library.

In addition to their fund-raising and advocacy efforts, Friends groups by nature provide a multitude of publicity and image-building opportunities for libraries. For instance, beginning a Friends group requires the launch of a campaign to attract members. Depending on the library's audience, this step involves publicizing its intentions through news releases, brochures, newsletters, bookmarks, mailing campaigns, phone solicitations, one-on-one interactions and Web sites targeted to attract possible Friends. Such activity also exposes the library to its core patron base, administrators and the law community. It showcases the library's collections and services to traditionally targeted patrons and increases its perceived value in the eyes of administrators and users.

Libraries can take advantage of the loyalty incentives and rewards they offer to Friends members to continue to build their image. To thank Friends appropriately for their contributions, libraries often hold special events, such as lecture series, book signings and dinners. These events offer an opportunity for Friends to rub elbows with the library's primary patrons. Special events often produce an eclectic mix of invitees, students, faculty, legal scholars, attorneys, judges, politicians and government officials — all intermingling due to the efforts of the library's Friends program. These opportunities impress the administrators. And when properly publicized in newspapers, firm and governmental newsletters, school newspapers and library brochures, these functions also increase the library's image to the public at large.

Lastly, the documentation used to keep Library Friends informed is useful as a public-relations tool for the library. Include a section on the Friends of the Library program in the library's annual report. At the end of every year, present Friends with an annual report, informing them of the library's progress in projects made possible by their patronage, such as special conservation projects, electronic and print collection development, rare book purchases or endowed librarian positions. The same annual report is also distributed to attorneys, faculty, judges and administrators. Consider the annual report as just another way to toot the library's horn.

A viable Library Friends group or Friends of the Library association requires a substantial amount of time, commitment and political maneuvering. But when the program is executed well, the public-relations rewards are well worth the effort.

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