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│          PR Rₓ Toolkit          │
│     Section I: The Basics       │
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Introduction
Libraries serve the public, whether that public is defined as a school population or whole communities. In many ways, libraries are an organic creation of public needs—social, intellectual, educational, economic, and entertainment. Libraries offer incredible products and services—and those services are free! Given all this, libraries should have no difficulty developing a strong buy-in from their public and enjoy incredible support and recognition, right?

While study after study shows that the public has great respect for libraries as institutions, garnering support in tangible form is often a challenge. The reason for this is simple: the public does not understand the actual (fiscal and social) support needed to make libraries—to make their library—vital and strong. The public often does not translate their philosophical appreciation of libraries to a personal connection with what their library can do for them, and correspondingly, they can do for their libraries.

Public relations and communications are central in bridging that gap. Beyond promoting existing library services, public relations is about making the library's mission relevant and important to the people that library serves. As with all mission-driven functions, PR is best delivered when it is carefully planned and directly related to the goals of the organization.

This section of the PR Rₓ Toolkit provides a brief framework for those wanting to create or fine-tune a communications plan. The section also covers the process of crafting key messages, whether for the organization's overall communication plan or for a special event or campaign. Section I also provides examples of how to use volunteers in your organization's PR efforts, and it offers guidelines for maximizing the Web environment for PR efforts.

Sample Communications Plan

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Use this outline as a template for developing your own communications plan or for revising an existing one.

Mission Statement
Your library may already have a mission statement, language that states the fundamental purpose of an organization and provides a guiding philosophy for its activities. The mission statement should serve as a framework for your public relations planning, with all goals, strategies and objectives flowing from it.

A mission statement can be as short as one sentence. An example is: "The Public Library Association enhances the development and effectiveness of public library staff and public library services." The important point is to capture your library or support group's reason for existing.

Assumptions for Planning Purposes
What is the context for your PR plan? This section should include financial, political, and other factors which directly affect the future of your organization. You might also include assumptions about currently available financial and volunteer support, needs of your constituencies, and potential growth of your area. If you have research about your library's constituencies and what they think, cite it here. Your plan might be for multiple years or for one specific project or campaign.

Key Messages
What are the most important things for your audiences to know about your library? You should have two to five key messages that express your mission and what makes you unique in a way that matters to those you serve.

Key messages should be simple, brief (no more than 10 words), and authentic. The messages should be incorporated consistently into all of the library's communications activities (e.g., website, news releases, brochures, events). All staff and volunteers should know them.

The following three examples are from the American Library Association's *Campaign for America's Libraries*:

- **Libraries are changing and dynamic places.** Librarians are techno-savvy, at the forefront of the information age, and help people of all ages find the information they need, when they need it.
- **Libraries are places of opportunity.** Libraries are part of the American dream, a place for education, self-help, and lifelong learning.

- **Libraries bring you the world.** Where else can you have access to nearly everything in print or online and even have the personal assistance of a librarian to help you find what you are looking for?

Audiences
Who does your library need to communicate with? Include both internal and external audiences. Examples include university administration (if you are an academic library), city council (if you are a public library), library patrons, library donors, principals and school boards, library volunteers, and local business and community leaders. Consider those who are most important to your library's success.

Communications Goals
These are the top two or three major things you want to happen as a result of the plan. Have no more than three of these big-picture communications goals. For example: "All local residents will be aware of the library and its services."

Strategies
How will you achieve the goals? Strategies are the broad categories describing the approaches to be used to meet your goals. For example: "Attract positive media coverage of new programs and services."

Tactics
Tactics are the to-do lists: the specific things that will be done under each strategy. Examples of tactics include creating a database of local media contacts, sending news releases announcing new children's programs, or pitching the children's librarian as television morning show guest. Include the timetable, person responsible for each tactic, and budget information in this section.

Evaluation
How will you measure your results? Include several success measures in your plan that tie back to your communications goals. For example, how much did usage of the library increase? How much media coverage occurred as a result of your efforts? How many people attended special programs?

Utilizing Volunteers to Help with PR

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A major part of public relations is consistency and continuity of publicity. Volunteers can help ensure that information about library programs and services are distributed on a regular and consistent basis. To accomplish this, recruit volunteers to:

- Prepare press releases and announcements about library programs and services weekly and email or fax them to media outlets.

- Compile and maintain lists of media contacts, lists of organizations that should receive regular information from the library, and lists of non-traditional public relations contacts (such as Yahoo groups).

- Distribute library newsletters, flyers, brochures, etc., to local organizations monthly or quarterly.

- Regularly post information about upcoming library programs to on-line calendars and submit information to community cable television calendars.

- Post flyers about library programs and services on community bulletin boards throughout the area.

- Clip articles and maintain clip files when articles appear in local newspapers, including the free papers and smaller community newspapers and magazines, about the library.

A broad definition of public relations includes customer service and helping patrons feel welcome and comfortable using the library. Volunteers can:

- Serve as greeters, welcoming patrons into the library, and directing them to general service areas.

- Provide help at self-check machines or other areas where a "personal touch" would be useful.

- Test library communications documents, surveys, and signage to ensure that the messages are reaching the intended audience with the intended information (get feedback for a communications audit).

- Record (voice and/or video) stories about ways that the library has helped patrons that can be used for marketing campaigns, funding requests, grant applications, and annual reports.

Volunteers can be ambassadors for library services and enhance the library's image by being prepared to talk about library programs, services, and issues at public events. Volunteers can:

- Be part of a speaker's bureau to attend public functions, community fairs, and group meetings to share information about library services and programs.

- Be available to talk to the media about why they use a specific library service or support the library in general.

- Deliver books and other library materials to child care centers, senior centers, shut-ins, and other satellite service locations.

- Be "pollinators" for library services by spreading the word about new or improved library features (for example, a new on-line catalog or database, new technology, or a specific program).

- Send positive, community interest letters to the editor on a regular basis and be willing to respond to articles and opinion pieces to "set the record straight" about library issues.

- Speak up at community meetings, school board meetings, and other forums to ensure that the library is recognized as a partner and/or to be a voice for the library, as appropriate.

- Include information about library activities in their business's internal newsletter or other publications.

Using Electronic Communications to Bolster PR Efforts

As everyone knows, special events can be planned perfectly and delivered beautifully, but without the audience you desire, much work will be for naught. In addition, if the special event is designed to inspire, indicate support, or illustrate success and no one attends, the entire goal or message of the event can be lost.

What is the answer? The answer is the very best event public relations possible, matched to the desired audience and delivering a matching message. If your audience is Web savvy, the Web can provide great support and delivery possibilities.

Web Event PR Venues
The World Wide Web offers a variety of ways for event planners to integrate web environments into event publicity and planning. Like any environment, however, the web provides both good and bad (but primarily good) elements for making dynamic information accessible.

Good Elements – Web-based Event Publicity
Web environments are unique environments, allowing publicity to be customized, personalized and updated with great speed and efficiency. Web publicity can provide critical publicity links to registration information, payment for events, pre-printed tickets, event directions, customized information (e.g., information and access for special needs, health-related issues), audience outcomes, content to read before/prepare for the event, updated news, activities/event agenda, credits for event planners and sponsors, fundraising activities, post-event content, post-event activities, and post-event evaluation.

Clearly, one major positive element of the Web is that it can be linked to other web-based tools that can also be used for publicity including links to other organizations' Web pages, individual emails, electronic lists, and blogs.

Bad Elements – Web-based Event Publicity
As with any "dynamic" environment, timing is everything. Connecting information to people through publicity and advertising can be typically a one-time thing, meaning that sending emails to individuals or lists may only get an individual's attention once. Therefore, *when* to send out e-publicity that links people to your Web page is a critical element of designing Web environments. Other more negative elements for event publicity delivered over the web can include:

- Web environments may be expensive to design, host, serve, and maintain
- Third party website managers may not maintain currency or accuracy needed
- Using a third party to update content may necessitate too long a lead time for changes needed

- Not all audience members have access to the Web, therefore multiple, more expensive venues may have to be employed to reach and attract all desired audience members
- Some interactive Web opportunities such as listserv and blogs may provide venues for unwanted comments and possible negative publicity

Good Elements – Web-based Event Planning
Event planning is a time-intensive but exciting activity. Using the web and web-based resources to assist and enhance planning is not new; it does, however, offer increasing sophistication and opportunities for success every year. The Web provides opportunities for diverse groups of planners to efficiently and effectively identify examples and benchmarks of event PR, link dynamic information for other event planners, display drafts of information for other planners during the planning stages, and complete other pieces of event planning such as forms and applications.

Bad Elements – Web-based Event Planning
Web-based event planning can limit those involved to those with Web skills and Web access – thereby possibly eliminating critical partners. Web-based planning, which often moving swiftly, can move along at a pace so fast that some individuals may not be able to keep up and, in fact, may get lost in a morass of emails and digital documents.

How to…

Plan/Publicize
1. Identify individuals who can participate in the medium of web-based planning and the level of their possible involvement including asking, are they:
- Individuals with only email access?
- Able to join/receive electronic list emails? In digest form?
- Able to exchange digital documents?
- Familiar with threaded discussions on emails?
- Familiar with blogs?
- Able to complete Web forms?
- Able to design Web pages?
- Have no or limited Web access but has access through others
- Have no or limited Web access by has access to faxed information

2. Establish Web-based forums for discussion and document sharing.

3. Establish identifying signatures for participating individuals for critiquing documents (e.g., colors, typefaces, formats).

4. Identify potential audiences accessible by Web including email addresses, and electronic lists critical to potential event/activity audiences.

5. Design Web/online content message(s) to match electronic forums and outline timelines for serving Web pages and distributing messages.

6. Identify who on the event planning group will respond to interactive discussions with potential event attendees.

7. Establish Web pages to "approach" for linking and advertising event Web pages.

8. Outline the timeline for distributing and updating content.

Recommendations
- Identify critical potential audience members who will assist event planners in publicizing through electronic posting/discussions. Leaders from the field can often – through comments and postings – engender more enthusiasm than event/activity planners.
- Strive to include strategic planning partners in specific – although in possibly limited ways - even through they might not have Web access in order to establish broad input at critical junctures.
- Rather than putting static content advertising a single event on a webpage, opt for dynamic effects for Web pages even though the content may be tangentially related or only focus on a single event. Ever-changing, but relevant, content builds a constituency for pre-, during and post-event activities.
- Be sure to designate event planners who will be the responders to web-based discussion and content. Invaluable enthusiasm for and commitment to the event can be the critical pieces to success as leaders take roles in creating online forum messages and responding to potential attendees' questions and ideas.

10 Big Ideas for Promoting Libraries

1. **Recruit every member of the library's staff to the public relations team.** Conduct a mini-training or brown bag lunch to make sure all staff (and volunteers, if applicable) can articulate the library's key messages. Considering printing an "elevator speech" (a 30-second description of the library that includes key messages) on a laminated card for staff and volunteers to carry in their wallets as a reminder.

2. **Do a communications audit.** Gather one example of every printed piece your library currently uses. Spread all of the pieces out on a conference table and take a look. Is it obvious that all of the pieces come from the same place? Are the colors and fonts consistent? Is the quality commensurate with the quality of your library? Do the pieces communicate your key messages? If not—it's time to refresh your materials and make them work better for you and your library!

3. **Become a sought-after location for important community gatherings** by offering space in the library. For many nonprofit organizations, the library is an ideal place to make important announcements or have off-site meetings or retreats. You benefit by getting key opinion leaders into the library! Consider sending a letter to top local nonprofits, inviting them to use your space for appropriate events.

4. **Leverage your library's vendor relationships.** Those who do business with your library are its natural supporters. They might be happy to sponsor a library program or event in exchange for recognition on your website or in a news release. Try asking them!

5. **Welcome feedback from your customers at every opportunity.** Consider asking patrons to provide email addresses so that you can take advantage of free email survey tools such as SurveyMonkey. Or, ask patrons to fill out a short customer survey in the library. Ask for permission to use their comments in your library's materials and website.

6. **Take advantage of national promotions such as National Library Week, Library Card Sign-Up Month, etc.** Offer special contests, promotions or celebrations, and invite the media to cover the kick-off or conclusion. Make the events as visually interesting as possible, and make sure the broadcast media as well as print media know what you're doing, such as a contest for kids dressed as their favorite literary characters or a special reading by local authors.

7. Remind your community—and the media—that the library is a center for learning the "back story" about world, national and local issues and events. **Consider compiling a suggested reading list in anticipation of the anniversary of major events such as Sept. 11, VJ Day, or, on the lighter side, popular holidays such as Valentine's Day, and sending a news release about the list to local media.**

8. **The media love to cover local angles for national holidays.** Jump on the bandwagon by hosting events on Groundhog's Day, St. Patrick's Day, or even national food days like Chocolate Day or Cheese Day. One of your best chances to get coverage comes during the holiday season between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day because news activities tend to slow down during holidays, and reporters are more available to review and use your information.

9. **Network—get out into the community and take every opportunity to let people know why the library is such an important and interesting place.** Practice your "elevator speech" and use it whenever you have the chance. Consider visiting general civic groups like Rotary and Kiwanis, as well as more specialized local organizations. Research where the key influencers are involved in the community, and attend the same events they do.

10. **Look for unique individuals to spotlight within the library.** Perhaps your volunteer organizer is a talented artist or your assistant librarian spends his or her free time training for the Olympics. Human interest stories are always popular with the media, and the personalities in the library can help to describe its unique environment and offerings.

Resources

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www.ala.org/ala/pio/mediarelationsa/availablepiomat/commhandbook.htm

Subsections: Credits

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"Using Volunteers": Jeanette Larson, Library Consultant
"Using Electronic Resources to Bolster PR": Julie Todaro, Dean of Library Services,
        Austin Community College
"10 Big Ideas for Promoting Libraries": Julie Todaro, Dean of Library Services, Austin
        Community College