

PUBLIC RELATIONS: A PANACEA TO PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES ENHANCEMENT

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Abstract

This paper discusses the need for effective public relations in public libraries; seeing the very sensitive position the public libraries occupy in the society as agents of educational emancipation. It takes a look at the Public and the indispensability of public relations activities in public libraries, which are geared towards better service delivery and increased patronage. Finally, it suggests ways by which library services in public libraries could be extended to all and sundry in the society; to the library users and to the potential users of the library through a well-organized Public Relations Programme.

Introduction

Public libraries occupy a very sensitive position in our national economy as agents of civilization and educational emancipation. Their importance can also be measured by the effect of good they have on the society; and this depends on the efficiency of their organization and operation in discharging their functions. This goes to suggest that public libraries should work relatively hard to have the desired effect on the populace. They should adopt effective public relations to ensure that all members of the society make maximum use of their resources. The arguments in this paper are that librarians, especially those in the public libraries, should be rather active in their work as information disseminators. They should be involved in giving people what they need as defined by the profession, instead of viewing their duty as assisting those who come to the library to get what they want.

Librarians as professionals have a duty to be much more deeply involved in the creation and distribution of tools for the efficient exploitation of knowledge and also in the dissemination of information to a wide range of users - the learned and the illiterates, the professionals and non-professionals and of course to all categories of people in the society. This is necessary for the creation of a well-informed society and in the eradication of illiteracy; and can only be achieved through a well-organized Public Relations strategy.

According to Igbokwe (1997), librarians as public relations personnel should aim at service; they should be vigilant and conscientious to keeping existing high ideas alive. It is desirable that they build even healthier traditions for the steady growth of the profession.

Public Relations

Public Relations as a field or activity is difficult to define succinctly because it is so varied in both purpose and method. It includes, inter-alia, all varieties of communication designed to raise funds, make someone or something better known, build public support for or against a piece of legislation, or otherwise effect public opinion about a person, organization, product or idea.

According to Sharma (2005), the definition given by the Institute of Public Relations says that "Public Relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its public.

Explaining further, he is of the opinion that the induction of public relations practice in an organization will portray public relations as a management function which evaluates attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the public interest, and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.

Furthermore, public relations could be explained as a field of activity concerned with building mutual understanding between an organization and its constituent publics.

Summarizing several other definitions, Harlow (1976 : 36) puts Public Relations as *a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its public; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinions, defines and*

emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change; serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.

Public Library and Public Relations

Public relations when applied to librarianship may be seen as an act or process of bringing information about the organization, college, or institution to bear on library functions and policies and the interpretation of library functions/policies and procedures to the public served by the library. In Angoff's(1973 .vii) opinion,

public relations is communication. If you can communicate the essence of your library to the appropriate audience, to the people for whom it has so much to offer, if you can somehow fix the library in their minds as a resource of incalculable value, and if you can do it in a manner so effective that it brings them to the library or makes the library an important personal interest, then you have achieved the objective of library public relations-

Therefore, Public Relations Unit designed to establish or maintain good relations between a person, organization or institution and its relevant public(s) is very much desirable in public libraries. This is because public library has different publics with whom it must communicate, and often these publics have different values and interests.

Supporting this view, Sharna (2005 p37) says: "the need for public relations is inherent in the very nature of modern society. Society is made up of many groups of people, each with its own interests which are sometimes conflicting. The harmonious functioning of such a society needs the help of public relations. "

The general functions of public relations in public libraries according to Aiyegunle & Moneme(2006) and Angoff(1973) include:

- a. To increase or expand membership and invariably for the exploitation and use of materials.
- b. To improve the image of the library and to generate goodwill.
- c. To increase the morale of staff, build loyalty and improve job performance.
- d. To encourage or discourage some government action; either directly by views of government officials or indirectly by creating pressure from the general public.
- e. To function as a means of propaganda to enlist support, financial or otherwise and to give political and social awareness to the library users,
- f. To get people to recognize that the library does have something for them and is willing and able to perform the services they need.
- g. To interpret library policy and earn acceptance for it.
- h. To explain the role of the library in the affairs of the community it serves.
- i. To shape and re-shape the image or standing of the library in a given situation.

Public Relations activities in Public Libraries are co-ordinated by public relations officers whose duties/roles include the following:

- a. Monitoring public opinion and analyzing the library's relationship with its public. This is accomplished through a programme of fact finding and feedback.
- b. Counseling management/library administrators on effective ways to influence public opinions.
- c. Planning, programming and implementing a programme of action and communication to advance the mission of the library.

In Tench and Yeomans (2006), four dimensions emerged as key roles for Public Relations:

- i. Management
- ii. Operational

- iii. Reflective, and
- iv. Educational

In their opinion, the public relations practitioners must be adaptable, energetic, versatile, diplomatic and resilient to get along with a mixed group of clients.

Effective public relations in public libraries can be achieved through the following ways:

1. **Annual Reports:** - The annual report prepared by the Chief executive to the Board of Directors and the Commissioner for Education is both a record of the year's accomplishment and a spring board for future development. It reports the growth of the collections and services to the readers, processing of materials, staff etc and also recounts successes and failures. The annual reports is a public relations tool which explains the library to those whose decisions and opinions govern and affect the growth and development of the public library.
2. **Library Handbook:** This is a public relations tool intended to introduce and explain the use of the library to the library users. It should explain the organization and arrangement of the materials, the various services rendered by the library, among other things.
3. **Booklist and Book bulletins:** This form of library publication is a list of recent or current acquisitions issued periodically which also contains introductory roles about the library. It is a current awareness service which also has public relations value as it indicates how organized the library is. The bulletin serves different purposes. By explaining the work of the various departments in the library, it helps to increase usefulness in the library. By describing important collections and special services, it points to ways in which the library may contribute to the educational programme.
4. **Bulletin Boards, signs and exhibits:** These have public relations values. Bulletin boards offer possibilities for interpreting library services. They can be used to encourage and stimulate interest in selected books, call attention to special resources and announce programmes of library. Good directional and instructional signs are also necessary and desirable as they in themselves answer many questions of the clients. Exhibits stimulate interest and draw attention to a particular or special material.
5. **Lobbying:** This is an effort to influence public policy and governmental action with information and persuasion.

Other Public relations activities include: the printed word, films and motion pictures meant to entertain, educate and advertise, lectures, symposia and conferences and direct mail communication.

The Need for Effective Public Relations in Public Libraries.

The field of Public Relations emerged as a result of the need to consider, build and respect public opinion. Everything an individual or organization does with other people, whose effect is visible to those people, affects relationship with them. No organization can avoid public relations or simply leave them to chance. For example, if one runs a business in town, one must operate in some sort of building. Whether you intended it or not, the appearance of that building affects public opinion of one's business, the location, the sign outside, the advertising, the quality of products or services provided, each has public relations components as it goes out first to make or mar people's relationship and patronage of the business. Therefore, effective public relations has become inevitable to the growth of any establishment, public libraries not exempted.

Explaining the inevitability of Public Relations in an establishment, Jefkins & Yadin (1998) are of the opinion that when an employer or client is shown the success of a Public Relations programme, that employer or client will have confidence in Public Relations and will be willing to continue and even expand the use of it. When the case is otherwise, they insist that there is something very its services. According to them, Public Relations should be irreplaceable and indispensable because it is a necessity and not a luxury.

The location, good architectural design of the building, good environment and surrounding are fundamental to stimulating/attracting members of the public to the library.

It is not a waste of resources if beautiful flowers and trees are planted and groomed, love gardens, for relaxation, sculptor for aesthetic appreciation, video bar strictly for leisure and educational values are provided so as to boost the public image of libraries and expand membership.

Extension services intended to provide library services to all and sundry in the community is an effective public relations tool. If the deaf, the blind, the mentally retarded, prisoners, hospital patients benefit from library services through well-planned and co-ordinated extension work, the library will be endeared and cherished by the general public.

In Nigeria, many people do not appreciate the significance of the library due to high level of illiteracy and lack of reading culture. These results to low library patronage. Even those who are literate tend to consult the library when in specific or definite needs e.g. students use the library more during examination periods and cease to come or come sparingly at other times. Public libraries should endeavour to correct this practice by organizing such other programmes like readership clubs to promote reading culture among students etc. This will go a long way to boosting and influencing public opinion of the library to the better.

In Nigeria too, it is also the responsibility of the State Public Library to establish, run, and maintain rural libraries. Most rural dwellers are mainly illiterate farmers and artisans without formal education, and so cannot read, write nor understand the wordings of a book. Therefore the librarian in the rural library has a duty to make them appreciate the 'book' and his services; since they tend to regard the library as foreign or a world that is not meant for them.

It has also been observed that in public service, approval of budget estimates and allocation of funds bear heavily on the strong public relations of the Chief Executive, that is, it is granted through the ability of the Chief Executive to defend the budget and his relationship with people that matter in the government.

Public libraries are not for profit making but rather a social institution, which means that apart from registration fees and fines, it is solely funded by the government and thus if adequate finance is not provided, its growth remains static and services unsatisfactory to the users. The need to enlist financial support and donations from the government, members of the public and philanthropists accounts for the need to adopt effective public relations in public libraries,

Conclusion and Recommendations

The public library is an invaluable centre in the educational development of man and more particularly so in academic and professional pursuit. The public library plays a very important role in the achievement of the educational goals and consequently the socio-economic, political and cultural development of any nation.

From this, suffice it to say that public libraries should beef up their public relations activities to include a variety of programmes or strategies meant to increase public awareness of the library, its functions and services. This will include all efforts to instill consciousness of the library in the minds of all within the library constituency.

On account of the above, the following recommendations are made:

1. Library administrators should use the direct mail i.e, letters of appreciation of donations or kind gestures to philanthropists or members of the public who contribute to it in one way or the other.
2. Use of Radio and Television announcements for publicity. Public libraries should be involved in a form of advertisement to draw the attention of the public to the available books and services of the library.
3. Public libraries should be more active in organizing lectures, seminars, conferences, choosing current and topical issues in politics, science and technology, business etc.
4. Library administrators should organize exhibitions on a regular basis to draw attention to special collections and stimulate awareness and interest in the use of such materials.
5. Rural libraries should participate actively in community life as it will help to build personal relationship which will invariably encourage them to come close to the library.

6. Public libraries should be involved in mass literacy campaign; they should organize public enlightenment programmes, organize educational film shows and such other activities that will promote the culture of its constituency.

It is strongly believed that these measures when adopted, will increase public awareness and enhance Public Library services.

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