

LEISURE READING OR INFORMATION CENTER WHAT IS THE LIBRARY'S ROLE?

Donald B. Reynolds, Jr.
Assistant Administrator
Central Kansas Library System
Great Bend, KS 67530

Prelude

As you have heard, I am from Kansas. For those who may not know where Kansas is, I have provided a map for you in your packet. I am a Kansan by choice (having been born and raised in New Jersey) who moved to Great Bend to work with what I consider to be one of the most creative and innovative approaches to providing library services to rural people--a regional cooperative library system.

The Central Kansas Library System is one of seven systems in Kansas established by the Kansas legislature in 1965. Participation was voluntary. Our purpose/mandate is twofold: 1) To serve rural people without a local library; 2) To improve library service where it already existed. We are supported by a mill levy tax on rural property paid by residents of the county not already paying a tax to a local town library. We have 52 legally established public libraries (two of which are public-school library combinations) and 12 outlets (book deposit sites which have no library board and no staff: one in a beauty parlor; one in a weigh station; one in a fire station; several in city clerk's offices; etc.)

As well as being a Kansan by choice (not accident of birth), I'm also a librarian by choice and not because my career in farming or teaching did not work out.

In *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt says that, "We are drowning in information and starving for knowledge." This afternoon, we are here to seek some answers together about the library's mission. Let me start our search with a story.

A Story

A hen and a pig were walking one morning. The hen said to the pig, "Mr. Pig, I'm hungry. Let us have breakfast." The pig woke up, "Mrs. Hen, I'm hungry too. Yes, let us have breakfast. What do you suggest we eat?" "Let us have

ham and eggs," replied the hen. "You, Mr. Pig, will supply the ham and I will give the eggs." The pig was silent for a minute or so, and then dryly commented, "That does sound fair, Mrs. Hen, that I supply the ham and you donate the eggs. However, I must point out, Mrs. Hen, that when you give the eggs, it is just a contribution on your part; for me, when I give the ham, it's total commitment."¹

I tell you this story so you will know that I've come here today to make a contribution, but not a total commitment. You see, lately I have begun to feel much like James Thurber when he said that he was no longer "young enough to know everything."

A. Introduction

My task is to speak to the role of the rural public library, especially in light of the information which has been gathered through the national rural library survey, just completed by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship. I have a feeling from the program that several other speakers will touch on similar issues.

It has been intriguing to read the survey results. In many respects, the survey documents what many of us have suspected.

- * People **see** the library as important to the well-being of their community. 80.1% of the respondents felt the library was "highly important" or "critically important" (Q. 15).
- * 61.6% of the respondents feel that the most important goal of their library was "to provide information" (Q. 2).
- * However, people **use** the library about equally as a source for best sellers (48%) as for reference books (49%).
- * People rank the library as least important for finding information about
 - Computers--42.9%
 - Getting or changing jobs--40.2%
 - Video cassettes--35.8% [I will go out on a limb here and predict a dramatic change in this evaluation; once a library starts loaning videos, the interest booms.]

We have always suspected that people do not take the library seriously as a source of information for questions about their livelihood, economic development, business, and major life questions.

Although this survey did not contact people who did not use the library, its findings parallel those of Ching-chih Chen and Peter Herson, as reported in their book, *Information Seeking* (Neal-Schuman, 1982), a survey of New England-area library use and non-use.

Chen and Herson believe that, "in an information-intensive society, the library must compete with a multitude of aggressive, enterprising information providers." It is their strongly held view that, "the library has diminished its position as an information provider by failing to service knowledge consumers' most basic needs."

Their respondents preferred information **gathered through interpersonal channels** (friends, co-workers, personal collections, other institutions). **Libraries only ranked ninth** among information providers used by their respondents.

On the accompanying chart from their book, you can see the frequency by topic of when people did or did not use the library (Figure 4-5). They have also compiled a list of reasons people have for not using the library (Table 4-4).

B. How are these results possible in these two surveys?

1. Sexual role stereotyping is still alive and well.

The rural library survey found that 72.8% of the library patrons completing the survey were women (Q. 27), probably a fairly accurate estimate of the male/female use of the library.

It is my feeling that our society is such that "culture" is for women to worry about; and "work/business" topics are for men to worry about.

In rural areas, for the most part, we perpetuate this: **libraries are for females.**

The general public perceives the library as a place presided over by nice, little old ladies. The public library was probably started by a women's club (in Kansas, by

statue, one seat on the state library advisory commission is held by a member of the state federation of women's clubs). The librarian may have a college degree, but it's not necessary. They "just" hand out westerns and romances; help the kids with their homework and school projects; **but they are not taken seriously as a source for information about "important" things**. Libraries are usually small, dingy affairs without too much attention paid to their overall appearance.

None of these may be the case, but the general public feels it that way.

The other information provider in rural areas (often over-looked in library literature) is the Cooperative Extension. Now the folks on these staffs are "professionals": the program is related to a university; each staff agent needs a college degree. The male agent handles agriculture ("work/livelihood") issues; the female agent handles homemaking ("culture") issues. There are beginning to be some changes here, as budget cut-backs are forcing the agents into each other's areas, and in some situations, the female agent has, by seniority and a freeze on staff hiring, actually been placed "in charge" of the county office--a task previously held only by the male agent. Women have become ag agents, but I am unaware of any male home economists.

TABLE 4-4. Reasons for Non-Use of Libraries

	<i>Number of Situations</i>	<i>Percent of Library Non-Use Situations</i>
Didn't need libraries	769	26.0
Didn't think libraries could help	425	14.4
Had enough information from other sources	322	10.9
Didn't occur to me	285	9.6
No reason given	243	8.2
In the past, I could not find what I want/need: assume the same to be true in this case	208	7.0
Lack of time	163	5.5
Libraries don't own what I want/need	97	3.3
Inconvenient location	93	3.1
Library holdings are not current enough	69	2.3
Assorted miscellaneous	286	9.7

FIGURE 4-5 Library Use and Non-Use by Selected Situations

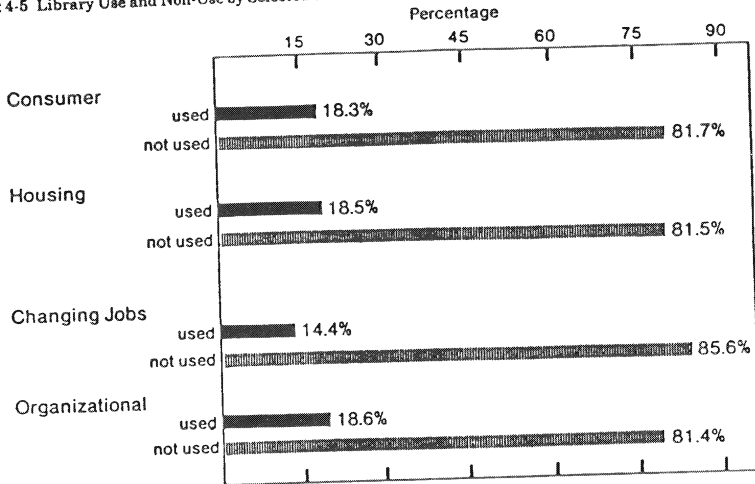
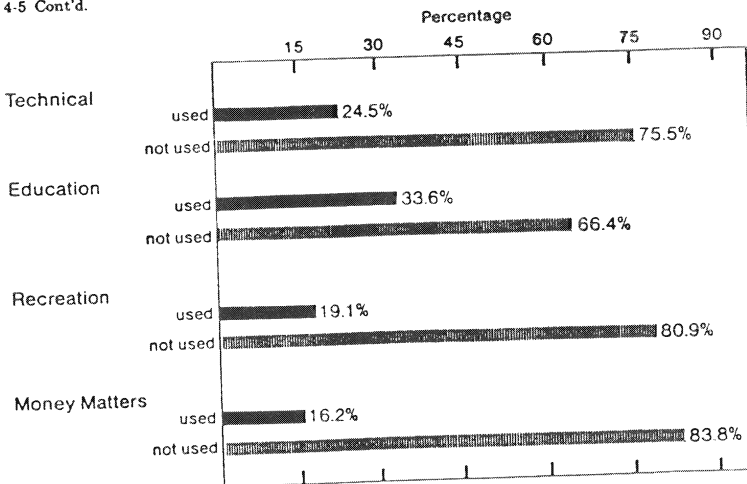


FIGURE 4-5 Cont'd.



from *Information Seeking* by Chung-chih Chen and Peter Herson (Neal-Schuman, 1982)

Cooperative extension and community planning literature rarely, if ever, mention libraries as a possible information source. (We were recently told that our State Librarian, when talking with the Department of Commerce about a cooperative economic development data base, was told by a state legislator, "That's none of the library's business.")

This is why some of us were a bit disheartened at first with the National Agricultural Library's Rural Information Center (RIC)--it went to the male ag agents first. We understood later how it needed to be done for the funding, but . . .

Certain other aspects of rural communities must be taken into account if we are to begin to understand the arena in which the library is functioning (and these notions are probably not new to you who live in a rural area).

2. Rural people are independent; they don't ask for help.

The rural crises are changing this a bit. People are discovering their interconnectedness: what happens in Japan or Argentina or Saudi Arabia does affect us directly.

3. Rural people make do.

They work around things and people. If you don't have the money, you don't do it. They oftentimes feel that they can't have what the "big towns" do.

4. Rural people have very personal (to a point) relationships.

Everyone seems to know, almost by osmosis, what everyone else is doing.

5. Rural people have the attitude that small/rural is terrific.

Like the farmer's reaction in the movie *Field of Dreams*: when asked, "Is this heaven?", he replies, "No, this is Iowa." Even so, there is still a niggling feeling about the "big towns" being better somehow, because they have more "stuff."

6. Rural people dislike change of just about any kind.

7. Rural is distance.

People spend a lot of time traveling long distances for just about everything. [I do not even remember the square miles of our System. I do know it is three hours north to south and three hours east to west.]

C. What is the public library's role in a rural community?

On May 19, 1809, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter to a friend who was establishing a community library:

"I always hear with pleasure of institutions for the promotion of knowledge among my countrymen. The people of every country are the only safe guardians of their own rights, and are the only instruments which can be used for their destruction. And certainly they would never consent to be so used were they not deceived. To avoid this, they should be instructed to a certain degree. I have often thought that nothing would do more extensive good at small expense than the establishment of a small circulating library in every county, to consist of a few well-chosen books, to be lent to the people of the county, under such regulations as would secure their safe return in due time. These should be such as would give them a general view of other history, and particular view of that of their own country, a tolerable knowledge of Geography, the elements of Natural Philosophy, of Agriculture and Mechanics. Should your example lead to this, it will do great good."

An 1883 issue of the *Boston Sunday Herald* said of the public library: "It's purpose is not purely educational, as many seem to think. . . . It is, what its name implies, a great popular library, and is designed to give pleasure to the masses of the citizens, as well as to impart instruction."

In his just-published book, *The American Public Library and the Problem of Purpose* (Greenwood, 1989), Patrick Williams writes, "For more than 130 years, the public library community has struggled with the problem of finding the right place for the library, the problem of purpose."

There is a wealth of writing about the library's purpose. In particular, the American Library Association has developed programs and documents about the underlying mission of the public library throughout the years:

"Our public libraries and our public schools are supported by the same constituencies, by the same methods of taxation, and for the same purpose; and that purpose is the education of the people."

- *William F. Poole*
- ALA Conference Speech, 1883

"The public library is maintained by a democratic society in order that every man, woman, and child may have the means of self-education and recreational reading. The library provides materials for education and advice in their use. It diffuses information and ideas necessary to the present welfare

and future advancement of a community. It strengthens and extends appreciation of the cultural and spiritual values of life. It offers opportunities for constructive use of the new leisure. It serves all ages and classes."

- *Standards for Public Libraries*
American Library Association, 1933

[The public library] "provides the means of self-education for all people in the community. It is a source of information on nearly every subject. It furnishes good reading for pleasure. It stimulates study and research, and helps to make possible many literary and scholarly achievements. It is basic to the education and continuous re-education of the American people as citizens, workers, and as civilized human beings. It plays a significant role in making democracy work by helping citizens to be enlightened participants in public affairs. It has come to be recognized as an essential part of our social and educational equipment."

- *Post-War Standards for Public Libraries*
American Library Association, 1943

With all of the voluminous opinions of library sages, I feel a bit overwhelmed at making a contribution to this body of thought. So, I am going to come down squarely on both sides: **the role of the public library is to provide leisure reading and to be an information center.** Or, to say it another way, the role of the library is to provide knowledge, culture, and recreation for all age groups. Service is the role of the public library; service to individuals.

Patrick Williams goes on to say that, "Taxpayers support the library because they believe it confers the benefits of knowledge and culture. Taxpayers understand, in an obscure way, that these attainments are of great importance. . . . Taxpayers may not be deeply interested in knowledge and culture for themselves; but they respect and appreciate the importance of both. . . . The public library community should work to restore the identity of the public library as an institution for informal self-education."

In *For the People: Fighting for Public Libraries* (Doubleday, 1979), Whitney North Seymour states unequivocally:

"The mission of the public library is to serve the public. Not *some* of the public. *All* of the public."

People in the community, as noted in the survey, expect both. Leisure reading and information are what people view the library as having. These are the positive services that make people feel good about having and paying for a library. As I pointed out earlier, people think the goal of the library is to provide information (61.6%), although they use it almost equally for best sellers and reference. However, when the Fort Worth, Texas, public library tried to build on land that had been bequeathed to the city for recreational use, the judge ruled that the library is an educational agency rather than a recreational one: "We do not believe that the study of books is in any sense a recreation." The city built its library elsewhere. (As reported in the March 1977 *Wilson Library Bulletin*, p. 581.)

The Chen-Hernon study documents the fact that, for the most part, people do not use the library; they know, consciously or unconsciously, that the library will not have what they need and want. People intuitively seem to know what the library has, and they go there for it. 91.4% of the rural survey respondents felt the library provided what they needed (Q. 5). 60.4% rated the services as excellent; 36.4% as good. Now, accounting for the fact that rural folks rarely speak ill of a neighbor who is trying to do their best, this is a high approval rating: a combined 96.8% rating the library as good to excellent.

As a community information center, however, the rural library has much to learn. Patrick Williams says, "The vision of the library as the provider of information for the people faded in the early 1980s." (p. 124)

In the 1978 study, *Passing the Threshold Into the Information Age*, the Arthur D. Little researchers outline three information-transfer eras:

- Era I (Discipline-oriented Era): "Knowledge for knowledge's sake."
- Era II (Mission-oriented Era): "Organize to do a job."
- Era III (Problem-oriented Era): "Solving society's problems."

Chen and Hernon feel the library still is organized and equipped to meet Era I needs, and is generally unable to cope with the requirements from an Era III information seeker. Chen and Hernon note that, "Librarians need to be reminded that those Era III needs can only be met with an Era III conception of the role of the

library as fully integrated public servant. In order to be viable in this economic climate, libraries must be transformed quickly to be in tune with the needs of their clientele."

In the March 1950 *Public Libraries*, Emerson Greenaway makes the point that we must face "the realization that urban and rural problems are so different that separate programs and policies may have to be set up." His observation has helped us realize that each library must determine for itself what it is going to be in its community. The authors of *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries* (American Library Association, 1987) feel strongly that no library can play all of the roles fully, but community leaders must select those roles which are most appropriate for their community situation. Figure 11 from their book outlines the possible roles.

<p><i>Community Activities Center:</i> The library is a central focus point for community activities, meetings, and services.</p> <p><i>Community Information Center:</i> The library is a clearinghouse for current information on community organizations, issues, and services.</p> <p><i>Formal Education Support Center:</i> The library assists students of all ages in meeting educational objectives established during their formal courses of study.</p> <p><i>Independent Learning Center:</i> The library supports individuals of all ages pursuing a sustained program of learning independent of any educational provider.</p> <p><i>Popular materials Library:</i> The library features current, high-demand, high-interest materials in a variety of formats for persons of all ages.</p> <p><i>Preschooler's Door to Learning:</i> The library encourages young children to develop an interest in reading and learning through services for children, and for parents and children together.</p> <p><i>Reference Library:</i> The library actively provides timely, accurate, and useful information for community residents.</p> <p><i>Research Center:</i> The library assists scholars and researchers to conduct in-depth studies, investigate specific areas of knowledge, and create new knowledge.</p> <p>Reprinted from <i>Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries</i> (ALA, 1987).</p>
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Figure 11 Public Library Roles

D. What are the implications of all of this? What do we do about it?

Gertrude Stein once wrote: "Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense."

I am speaking from the perspective of being a librarian from a rural setting. The latest statistics available from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that 64% of the public libraries in this country are in towns with populations below 10,000 people.

My quick review of several midwestern states found that:

Kansas

317 public libraries: 69% in towns under 2,500
90% in towns under 10,000

Iowa

520 public libraries: 76.7% in towns under 2,500
93.6% in towns under 10,000

Nebraska

259 public libraries: 78% in towns under 2,500
93.8% in towns under 10,000

North Dakota

79 public libraries: 60.7% in towns under 2,500
82% in towns under 10,000

A further fact interesting to note: in Kansas 3% of the public libraries serve towns that make up 42% of the population; in North Dakota 10% of the public libraries serve 58% of the population.

I have always quibbled with Bernie Vavrek about the definition of rural: towns with populations as high as 25,000 are not rural to me--no matter what the U.S. Census people say. Rural is also not the living areas within the one to one-and-one-half hour commuter ring around an urban center. Towns with under 10,000 people--not within an hour's commute of an urban center--now that's rural! [All of our member librarians wanted me to be sure that I said that.]

So, where's the common sense?

1. Librarians need to be trained as community servants.

The library is a person, and that person is the librarian. The library is an

absolute reflection of the personality of the librarian who runs it. Most rural librarians do not have an MLS degree; they are usually "one person" shops! We must recognize and accept the fact that the community librarian without an MLS is a functioning professional, albeit one who needs more training. MLS-trained librarians could learn much from these non-degreed colleagues.

Alvin Johnson in *The Public Library--A People's University* (American Association for Adult Education, 1938), says that library schools should provide training "in the educational meaning of books and in the organization of education groups." Graduate library schools must design their curriculum to train their students to be community participants and leaders. In his book, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, Robert Greenleaf argues that "a leader can no longer be seen as the individual riding a white horse and summoning his troops to combat. Rather each of us must struggle to help those around us live their own lives more fully and successfully."

Charles Robinson speaks eloquently about the librarian's servant role in his article, "Can We Save the Public's Library?" (*Library Journal*, 1 September 1989): "In simple terms, the public library is an educational institution in the broadest possible meaning of that term, but it is not an academic institution. Trying to make it academic will endanger the existence of the public library. . . .

"The hope and promise of public libraries is in the smaller libraries--or those large libraries which are really consolidations of small service outlets for reasons of efficiency and economy. . . . The small libraries, and almost all American public libraries are 'smaller libraries,' have nearly cornered the supply of innovation, service orientation, and response to user demands in the field--although those characteristics are far from prevalent even among smaller libraries. . . . The future lies in responsiveness to the very people our libraries were created to serve, the people who provide the funds to serve their interests, not ours. Responsiveness demands. . . . providing service to the people who support us, service in the public's interest through the public's library."

2. Librarians and board members must assess the library in relation to the community.

Charles Robinson says that, "The public pays for the library, so the public should get what it wants." (*Publishers Weekly*, 13 August 1979). Library leaders must recognize the multiple responsibilities of the public library. Using the *Planning & Role Setting for Public Libraries* procedure, they can determine the appropriate public library roles for their own community.

"With the advent of the mass paperback book, the public library has ceased to serve as a primary source of adult 'light reading.' Increasingly, the public library has become the community's encyclopedia of hard facts about everything under the sun, a reference library for student and adult researchers, a children's reading room, young adults' library, adult-education facility, senior citizens' second home. On top of this, as the community requires it, the public library also serves as information and referral center for social services, job opportunity and career development resources, focal point for programs to reach the poor and undereducated, library service center for institutions, and special library for the blind and handicapped."

- Whitney North Seymour, Jr.

For the People: Fighting for Public Libraries, Doubleday, 1979

3. Librarians need to find out who the other information providers are.

They need to find out what they have; let them know what the library has; learn to refer questions to other providers.

In "The Public Library: Middle-age Crisis or Old Age?" (*Library Journal*, 1 January 1983), Lowell A. Martin writes that, "The public library may find its niche in the information complex, but I doubt if it will be as 'the information center.' . . . What is the future of the public library? One answer is that people, at least some part of the populace, want a place to which they can turn to get the portion of the record of knowledge and experience that they cannot get elsewhere. This is the part of the record not aimed at a mass audience, the part that people seek as individuals. Here is the essence of the library, ministering to the searcher alone and unique. . . ." That is, to provide information in depth to an individual.

There needs to be developed a formal, continuing dialogue on all levels--local, state, regional, national--between the cooperative extension agents and library leaders. The cooperative extension calls itself the People's University. Well, just as a fine college or university needs a library to fulfill its mission, so is the public library the people's library for the extension's university.

On 21 July 1982, Bernie Vavrek proposed at the **Joint Congressional Hearing on the Changing Information Needs of Rural America** the development of a national rural policy and the establishment of a Rural Information Caucus. I think this idea is more important than a general White House Conference on libraries (of course my prejudices and biases may be showing here!).

Perhaps we need to establish a Rural Library Association quite separate from the American Library Association.

The ALA/Public Library Association Rural Library Services Committee is tackling the role of the rural public library in programs it will sponsor at the March 1991 PLA meeting in San Diego and at the 1991 ALA Annual Meeting in Atlanta.

4. Small, rural libraries need to establish and join a network of cooperating libraries (regional library systems).

These cooperatives can provide a variety of professional support services, especially training for librarians, along with being the clerical hands needed by rural librarians to keep them at the front desk helping patrons instead of in back rooms doing paperwork.

5. Librarians need to be proactive not just reactive.

Librarians can't sit and wait for people to show up with questions and requests. They need to get out and integrate into the community: find out what people need, get it, then take it to them.

As Whitney North Seymour says, "These departures from simply serving as a reading shelf for a select group of book users are all to the good. Public tax moneys spent on public libraries should not be used to benefit the select few. There is an affirmative duty of public libraries to serve the entire community, and that means everyone who can use their service to advantage. This is not a process of self-selection, where the librarian can wait behind the counter for knowledgeable users to appear. It includes an obligation on library

trustees and staff to determine just what the community's information and reference needs are, to equip the library to serve those needs with materials and qualified personnel, and then to work out effective delivery procedures to get those services to the members of the community who need them."

The "**Steps for the Librarian**," which you have in your packet, indicates a process which applies to the general management of the library in all areas, not just economic development, for which we prepared it. Each librarian must be prepared to spend, and the board support, at least 10% of work time outside the library building attending community group meetings and visiting with community leaders.

6. Librarians need to stop attending so many meetings with other librarians: it's the saved talking to the saved; the committed talking to the committed.

Librarians need to take that time and use it productively for attending meetings of other groups.

Chen and Herson: "By developing a sensitivity of and responsiveness to the information needs of the general public, libraries can envision and execute programs and services to meet these needs and establish themselves as vital and invaluable community resources."

It is said that funding follows performance. I would suggest that serious funding problems or lack of public support is a direct result of librarians not being responsive to community wants and needs. Libraries ought to be organized for people's needs, not for what librarians think their needs ought to be.

There is a caveat here: The community can only accept and move as fast as it is able to accept and move.

Goes a fable for the nuclear age:

The Lamb Who Imitated the Lion

"The lion, who ruled the animal kingdom, ate a different one of his subjects every day. Sometimes it was a pig, sometimes a deer--and occasionally he ate a chicken if he wanted a smack. No one complained. That was the way things had always been.

One day, a lamb, having observed the behavior of the lion, marched up to a chicken, kicked her senseless, and ate her.

The other animals were outraged. They put the lamb to death--for challenging the established social order."

Alan Neidle
Fables for the Nuclear Age (Paragon House, 1989)

Will Rogers wrote: "Even if you are on the right track, you will get run over if you just sit there," which brings me to my last point of common sense.

7. Be a hen not a goose.

The 18 August 1988 issue of the *Rooks County Record*, a weekly newspaper published in Stockton, Kansas, a town of 1,800 people, carried the following on its editorial page.

A Fable

A goose is probably the most stupid creature that God ever created. Wh*en a goose lays an egg, what does she do? Does she flap her wings and lift her voice to the high heavens announcing the fact? No! She waddles off as if she were ashamed of the feat and tells no one.

What does a hen do when she lays an egg which is much smaller than the fine specimen produced by the goose? She announces the fact to all who will hear. She lifts her voice in glee. She is proud of her product and wants the whole world to know about it. What is the end result? There is usually more demand for hen eggs than there are goose eggs. It pays to advertise. The hen knows this but the goose doesn't.

So, take your mission and roles and promote, promote, promote!

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