

## PUBLIC AWARENESS IN RURAL LIBRARIES

Charles E. McMorran, Director  
Boone-Madison Public Library  
Madison, West Virginia

Making the public aware of a library's existence and services is vital if there is to be increase in circulation and/or funding. In the rural community, the librarian may face limitations in opportunities to achieve public awareness, but if he looks at the situation in a creative manner and with a "rural" approach, he quickly identifies the large variety of communication media at his disposal.

The first that comes to mind is the local newspaper. Most small papers are anxious to receive local news that goes beyond the facts of who's visiting whom and who's in the hospital. In writing for the paper a single press release from time to time is not enough. A regular weekly or biweekly column with an appropriate title or heading is vastly superior because readers will see the title and be reminded of the library's existence. The library should continue to prepare press releases of important events in addition to the column news.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the larger "small towns" have radio stations that are required to commit time to public service messages as are national television and radio stations. Here again one will likely find that the station is eager to deliver public service messages on the air. The library can provide these messages in three ways. One is through regularly scheduled public awareness programs during which the librarian is interviewed by radio staff. A second approach can be short announcements of

upcoming special events. Third, the American Library Association pre-records special messages which lend a definite air of professionalism to the local radio and provide ear-catching ideas that put the local library in the forefront of listeners' minds.

In a rural community the library is linked with the persons who work in it; these people become predominant advertisements for the library. The more people who work in the library are involved in a wide variety of community activities the more advertisement the library receives. At times rural librarians find they are approached with reference questions at the local supermarket more often than they are asked on a "slow day" at the reference desk.

Another setting for informal, personal communication is a local center, e.g., a coffee shop or restaurant, where the librarian might meet community leaders and exchange information.

Rural libraries have a very powerful source for local communication that is not always used to its fullest extent, i.e., the Board of Education. Most school systems have an efficient means of delivering information to each school each day and are usually pleased to include library letters and news. Principals regularly contact students and teachers by public address systems; if requested by phone or letter, the principal might include special library events in his announcements. Every school also has bulletin boards that can be used for library promotion ideas. Attendance at the Boone-Madison Public Library's Summer Reading Program was more than doubled last year as a result of the distribution of a simple half-page flyer handed out to each student in the county at the end of the school year. Local banks and utilities may be willing to include well-designed

announcements about the library with their monthly statements and bills.

In the rural community a very powerful source for public awareness and support lies in service clubs. Librarians need to look beyond the traditional practices of providing programs for these groups and asking for money donations. Genuine commitment to, and involvement in, the activities of these organizations by the librarian brings him into contact with the local leaders - newspaper editor, manager of the radio station, businessmen, politicians, educators, clergy, bankers - who can help to promote and implement public awareness of library programs and needs. These programs and needs can be conveyed to service club members through traditional presentations to the assembled group or through informal discussion with friends/colleagues.

These are but a few of the wide range of possible communication facilities available in a rural community. As is readily acknowledged, in a small, close-knit group, the major element of communication is talk among friends. People tend to talk about things shared in common which may be why we talk to so many people about the weather. If a community can become aware of the fact that the library is something they share in common and something in which they can take pride, perhaps the best means of communication, i.e., discussions among friends, will result in a better-used and better-supported local library.

---

<sup>1</sup>For an article on how to write a column see:

Matthew C. Kubiak, "Column on Columns," The Library Imagination Paper, Summer, 1980, p 1.