

## OUTHOUSE DISPLAYS: A RURAL LIBRARY BONANZA

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I can assure you that the most likely image conjured up by the title of this presentation is the wrong one. It has nothing to do with half moons on oaken slab doors nor outdated Sears and Roebuck catalogs hung on rough hewn walls. Out-house displays is descriptive of displays that are in contrast to in-house displays. They are displays which introduce an element of merchandising into library public relations and which can be an effective answer to some major public relations problems confronting the rural library as the battle for public funds becomes more competitive.

Among the problems we face are reaching more of our geographically isolated population not now served, building more substantial relationships within the commercial community and in general, establishing a more positive image of ourselves as a viable community resource.

Perhaps some rural public libraries have not become too involved in the area of public relations. This is understandable in view of the reality of short staffing and the fact that so much of our energies must be spent in the daily struggle to provide the basic necessities of library service. It is, nevertheless, one of the most important aspects of rural librarianship and, as will be noted later, within the reach of most small public libraries.

Although there are many definitions of the term public relations, Allen Angoff seems to say it all when he states,

"If you can communicate the essence of your library to the appropriate audience, to the people for whom it has 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 prime objective of library public relations,"<sup>1</sup>

An analysis of Angoff's statement reveals three important points to be considered. The first deals with the audience to whom you wish to appeal, the second lies in the phrase about fixing the library in their minds as a "resource of incalculable value" and the third in the phrase about "an important personal interest." These three ideas are virtually inseparable in the application I assign them.

The rural librarian probably doesn't need the Planning Process<sup>2</sup> to tell her who she needs to attract to her library. Although we have segmented publics like the urban library, Wessie Connel puts it quite succinctly by indicating that "our advantage rests with constant, close observation" of them.<sup>3</sup> Constant close observation of our communities and our people is the advantage that enables us to pin point a specific group toward which to mount a public relations campaign.

My own community, for example, is currently in dire economic shape. An unemployment rate of over 14% coupled with recently doubled real estate taxes brought on by the fiscal irresponsibility of our county officials have taken their toll. Although we have already seen increased use of materials in the areas of applied arts and sciences, we are aware that there are many more people "out there" who could benefit from these resources but who are among that large portion of the adult population who traditionally do not consider the public library for any reason let alone as a vehicle to implement survival in difficult economic times.<sup>4</sup>

If we, then, make the decision to try to appeal to the many area residents whose budgets are being strained by unemployment and/or increased tax rates on their homes, this groups of economically distressed people becomes an appropriate audience in whom we wish to create an awareness of what we can offer them. Having an appropriate audience, we must now consider how to attract their attention.

Traditional public relations dissertations emphasize the use of a number of different methods of conveying the library story to the general populace. They include the use of radio, television, newspapers, programming and in-house display.<sup>5</sup> Although some of these methods can be pertinent in rural library public relations, their value is peripheral in this particular situation.

Many small town radio stations, for example, do not do much in the way of local public service announcements. Relying heavily on professionally produced PSA's that deal with national causes, it is difficult for the rural library to secure adequate air time for program promotion. There may be a community bulletin board type of presentation but a group or organization using this means is generally limited to a three or four days-in-a-row statement concerning an upcoming event, usually at the same time or times in the station's daily schedule. One cannot possibly convey the essence of a subtle public relations endeavor through the spoken word, anyway. How can you tell a group of people that you want to offer them something because you know that they need you because you know that they are in the midst of a battle for economic survival? They wouldn't hear it even if you could or had the audacity to do so.

Television is an even less effective medium for rural public relations, no matter the nature of the project. In addition to all of the facts mentioned in relations to the use of radio, another obvious one comes to mind. The rural library doesn't usually have access to a television station. Although small town television stations are beginning to spring up here and there, it will be quite a while before most of us have access to totally local programming through that medium. Unhappily, none of us can follow the lead of libraries in the St. Paul-Minneapolis area that recently spent \$10,000 for spot ads in an effort to lure new patrons into the library. One suspects, anyway, that the expense was out of proportion to the result as the report of this activity was concluded by mild statement to the effect that new patrons have appeared through the area.<sup>6</sup>

Newspapers have been important to all of us in one way or another and particularly in relation to news stories about our libraries and various programs we may wish to promote. Unfortunately, the use of classifieds or visually arresting display ads are economically difficult for us to deal with. Beside that, in relation to the appropriate audience we have chosen (financially distressed people), we gamble if we try to reach them through newsprint as a daily newspaper might well be an unaffordable luxury for our audience.

Obviously, programming and in-house displays will not help us to reach the group we have earmarked for our public relations thrust. Under the best of circumstances, programming only reaches a select few who are already acquainted with the library and of course, in-house displays only reach those who are in the library to see them.

Realizing that it isn't likely that we are going to solve our program through the use of traditional public relations techniques, we must come up

with a new approach in our attempt to establish the library as a valuable resource in the minds of our target group. In trying to create an alternative method, the current "marketing of the library fad" comes to mind. Although much of that concept is without practical meaning for the rural library, one aspect of the marketing concept strikes a chord. It lies in recent efforts of some libraries to establish branches or information kiosks in shopping malls.

This strikes a cord because we sense that our problem can only be solved by touching people where they are. We know that we must go to them before we can get them to come to us. Obviously unable to set up a branch or even a small walk-in kiosk type facility, we must adapt this idea to our purposes and to our limited means.

Recalling the recent success, as indicated by subsequent circulation, of an attractive display of library books on quilting which our library set up at a quilt show sponsored by the Hospital Auxiliary, the prospect of using merchandising techniques in other ways becomes a distinct possibility. If we believe that merchandising is aimed at the direct stimulation and motivation of "consumers" (our projected public) to "buy" (use our resources) then we can surely mount our attack on that premise.

A brief look at motivational behavior might be helpful here. There are a number of schools of thought about motivation in the field of psychology, but we find Lewin's ideas on the subject to be particularly appropriate. Simply, Lewin associated need with any motivated state, suggesting further that need creates an emotional situation described as tension. In other words, a need creates a tension which motivates an individual to act in such a way that the tension is relieved.<sup>7</sup>

Applying this to our situation, it occurs to us that through the use of marketing techniques we can create the notion of need for library resources in a prospective patron's mind which might, in turn, bring him into the library.

A perfect example of what happens when a need is created through marketing techniques can be shown when we consider what happens when we go into a book store. Although we may have gone into the shop just to buy a book of poetry for great Aunt Alice, we are suddenly aware that there are a lot of other books that we need but had not considered prior to seeing them on display. The same thing happens at the super market or the card and novelty shop or the hardware store.

Although it seems that not too much has been written by marketing people about the function of retail display in the area of merchandising, some purposes have been outlined. Two that apply to our goal are to remind customers (potential patrons) of our products (our library resources) and to stimulate impulse buying (to create a tension which can be resolved by going to the library).<sup>8</sup>

Before going on to a description of the elements of our out-house displays, we must decide how to reach the prospective patron. Where will his needs, those emanating from his unstable financial situation, be likely to take him out there in the marketplace? He will undoubtedly be found in the places that will enable him to trim his budget. For example, the prospective patron will be found in the hardware store as he gears up to do his own home repairs, or in the auto parts store as he find it more economical to maintain his vehicle himself or at the fabric shop as a great savings can be had in creating one's own clothing. It is hoped that a meaningful display of library materials in locations such as these will reach our appropriate audience, con-

veying the idea that the library has much to offer in response to their needs. It is hoped that the library will become an important personal interest.

A little play of imagination will suggest other potential audiences. Our library, for example, has recently made arrangements to display large print materials in an optometrist's office. Many people with failing eyesight aren't even aware that such resources exist. What better place for them to discover it than in the eye doctor's office?!

Another display is planned for a local Health Fair being sponsored by our hospital and centering on the theme "Wellness." Health-oriented filmstrip-cassettes will be played continuously, exercise and diet books as well as those dealing with how to live with specific diseases such as diabetes and stroke will be featured and information about the Tell-Med line to which our community has access and which is sponsored by our District Center will be handed out. Indeed, it would seem that there is no end to the appropriate audiences in our midst or the number of places you can go to attract their attention - to make the library a resource of vital personal interest.

A little more imagination will reveal that beside reaching a particular audience, out-house displays such as those mentioned above have auxiliary benefits. They will provide an opportunity to establish contact with business and professional people within your community and to build a cooperation which will benefit everyone. You will also be creating an image for your library that reflects an awareness of community needs as well as a concern for the information needs of area residents. Even if a need for library resources isn't created within all of the people who see a particular display, a subtle psychological process will take place in which the image of your library is mentally stored away for future reference and for now unfelt needs that may appear later.

The execution of out-house displays come down to certain principles and although the displays themselves can take many shapes, they must embody certain elements:<sup>9</sup>

1. Attractive and eye-catching are vital descriptive adjectives for merchandising displays.
2. A strong identification with the library must be evident.
3. The items being displayed must be of such quality that they build confidence in the prospective patron (e.g., if the only book you have on restoring auto finishes is worn and battered, don't display it. Although that condition reflects great patron usefulness and its past value to other, shoddy "merchandise" is a turn-off.)
4. Provide enough explicit but concise information so your meaning can be recognized and understood at a glance.
5. The display must create an appropriate atmosphere (e.g., a pink background might be suitable for your display at the fabric center but quite inappropriate at the auto parts store!)
6. Try to include a give-away with your display so that the prospective patron will have a reminder to carry away with him.

At this point a lot of rural librarians, unaccustomed to this kind of public relations perspective, are probably shrugging their shoulders --feeling themselves unable to meet such a challenge due to a lack of time, staff, money and/or creativity. Take heart, for if you really feel that this kind of promotion would have merit for your library any of these real or imagined drawbacks can be surmounted.

After making the commitment, brainstorm with staff, friends, trustees -- any interested parties. The ideas will flow as will the names of people you know within the community who have the necessary talents to help carry out the project. Your high school wood-working classes, for example, might build display boards to your specifications for no more than the cost of the materials. Art classes might be interested in designing appropriate displays



within your guidelines. There are many possible resources from students to retirees. Include them all as potential helpers.

If money is a problem (and when isn't it?) be a little heretical in your next budget and divert funds ear-marked for programming and audiovisual materials. You will surely get more for your money through a display project as you will reach new people, hopefully creating new interest in and support of the library.

If public relations time isn't already set aside in your busy schedule, make an effort to do so. It need not be much as one of the interesting aspects of this type of endeavor is that you can really think about it any time -- while driving to work, doing laundry or whatever. In fact, before you know it, whenever you go within your community you will find yourself automatically thinking about who you might reach there and how you will go about it.

The kind of out-house display ideas dealt with here are designed with emphasis on our most important resource: Books. It is a straight-forward approach to reaching potential patrons and avoids the image so frequently promoted today in which the library, as so aptly described by Will Manley, becomes a "sort of schizzy, mixed bag of toys, tapes and Trollope."<sup>10</sup> It is an approach which holds promise for expanded service, expanded patronage, expanded circulation and expanded awareness, both people and political-wise. What more could you ask!

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Allen Angoff, ed. Public Relations for Public Libraries: Essays in Communication Techniques (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup>Vernon E. Palmour, Marcia C. Bellassi and Nancy V. de Wath, A Planning Process for Public Libraries (Chicago: American Library Association, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>Wessie Connell, "Public Relations for the Small Public Library" in Public Relations for Public Libraries, ed. Allen Angoff (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. 92.

<sup>4</sup>Douglas M. Knight and E. Shepley Nourse, eds. Libraries at Large (NY: R. R. Bowker, 1969), p. 76.

<sup>5</sup>Steven Sherman, ABC's of Library Public Relations (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1971).

<sup>6</sup>"Libraries Opt for Paid Aids to Lure New Patrons" from "In the News" in American Libraries, March, 1979, p. 105.

<sup>7</sup>International Encyclopedia of Psychiatry, Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Neurology, s.v. "Motives and Needs as Traits," by Abraham K. Kourman, Marguerite F. Levy and Walter Reichman.

<sup>8</sup>John F. Luick and William L. Ziegler. Sales Promotion and Modern Merchandising (NY: McGraw Hill, 1968), p. 91.

<sup>9</sup>Adapted in part from Luick and Zeigler.

<sup>10</sup>Will Manley, "Facing the Public" in Wilson Library Bulletin, January, 1981, p. 367.

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