
Academic library public relations: A week of celebration

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Awards and free searches as incentives for library awareness.

The implementation of library public relations is narrowly considered by some to be in the public library arena. A look at the facts of life for libraries argues against this notion. An effective library must be responsive to and gain support from its constituents, whether members of a community, company, or institution. Though the development of good relations with its constituency is something no library has the luxury to disregard, the paths to this goal are numerous.

At Washington State University, a grassroots library staff group came together in 1979 to consider some public relations aspects that fall outside the range of regular administrative concerns. This group wanted to raise the library's visibility on campus and improve relations externally with university administration, faculty, and students, and internally with library staff. This energetic committee (the Public Relations Interest Group, later called PROMO) has activated many plans to carry out the group's mission and goals, including a talk on censorship by a regionally known local columnist, a series of summer outdoor readings,¹ workshops on effective communication with campus

media groups, and a library photo-display for fall home football game gatherings. PROMO has also been involved in publicizing the library's online public access catalog by running a contest to name the catalog (Cougalog), and by designing a logo for the catalog. Early in their existence, the members also decided that observance of National Library Week would provide a framework for some major public relations activities.

Library awareness week

The celebration got underway in 1980 and was planned to coincide with the ALA-sponsored National Library Week in April. It has been a campus event every April since, though after several years of observance the name was changed to Library Awareness Week to give it more local emphasis. National Library Week graphics, posters, and occasionally themes, have been used to advantage whenever possible.

Every year the celebration has a different complexion, but two major activities have remained as the foundation: 1) the Faculty Library Award for a member of the teaching/research faculty who has provided outstanding support to the library, and 2) free computer literature searches by drawing of submitted names. Other events throughout the

¹Transplanted from Kansas State University by Paula Elliott. See her description in *C&RL News*, May 1984, pp. 228-32.



Credit: *The Record*, WSU

Maureen Pastine, director of WSU Libraries, presents the 1987 Faculty Library Award to John Elwood, chairman of the English Department.

years have been free film showings from the collection of the Instructional Media Services, the above-mentioned name-the-database contest with a cash prize, a talk by a well-known regional author who is willing to speak on behalf of the libraries, special exhibits, a surplus book sale, and receptions for the campus community in the libraries' foyers. Emphasis has been on those activities which are low-expense and, increasingly, on those that do not require intensive planning and time.

Faculty Library Award

Adopted from Texas A&M, the Faculty Library Award, more than any other event, has become the backbone and mainstay of the week's plan. It has also developed for the Libraries a group of faculty who can be identified as strong supporters and who have appreciated more than we could have guessed, recognition of the energy and commitment they have afforded the library. Suggestions for candidates are requested from the entire campus along with documentation of their library-related activities. A committee of library staff members reviews the submissions and selects the faculty member to be honored, based on six criteria: personal use of the libraries, efforts to encourage students to use the libraries, interaction and cooperation with libraries' faculty, service on library committees, and evidence of appreciation for and a positive view of the WSU Libraries.

The award, which includes two plaques (one for their office and one for the main library's foyer) and cash gift, is presented at a special recognition ceremony during the week of celebration. The pro-

gram includes an address from a notable campus figure, presentation of the award by the library director, and a wine and cheese reception for colleagues, friends, and library staff. Press releases and photos are distributed to campus and community news media both after the selection of the faculty member and after the ceremony.

Free computer literature searches

Several formats for advertising the Libraries' literature search service were experimented with until a satisfactory solution developed. Four libraries—social sciences and humanities, education, health sciences, and science and engineering—participate by running free literature searches during all or part of one day during the Library Awareness Week. Reduced or free demonstration rates are provided by the database vendors for the scheduled times. Interested parties fill out their name, phone number, and proposed search title on forms and deposit them in boxes in the libraries; those drawn receive approximately 20–30 minutes of search and printout time.

Coordination of activities

In the fall, the public relations group appoints a chair who in turn organizes 5 subcommittees (Budget, Publicity, Faculty Library Award Selection, Faculty Library Award Ceremony, and Literature Search drawing) to design and carry out plans for the celebration. Committees are made up of PROMO members and other willing library staff. Special exhibits and visiting library speakers,

which in recent years contributed greatly to the festivity of the week, are coordinated through existing library channels.

As would be expected with an undertaking of this sort, a thorough and conscientious job by the Publicity Committee can make a larger success of the work done by every other committee and individual. The flyers, programs, newspaper ads, contacts with news agencies, and photos of notable occasions during the week carry the effort a substantial distance toward the project's goal of increasing positive awareness of and support for the Libraries.

Publicity costs always elevate the celebration's budget, but the library administration has consistently supported the plans. The inclusion of the surplus book sale in Library Awareness Week events is appropriate, for the proceeds from the sale cover a portion of the expenses.

Project evaluation

Every year PROMO reviews the project in a post-Library Awareness Week critiquing session and collects committee reports and documents.

One recommendation, forwarded annually, is that it would be wise to start planning earlier, but it seems never to be soon enough to prevent critical details from piling up a month before the week begins. Perhaps that is to be expected when extraneous activities, done volunteer style, come second to the press of job responsibilities.

The full effects of library publicity, and specifically a project of this nature, are not easily determined. PROMO has not attempted to measure, for example, how many library users were gained, how much positive influence was exerted, or the disposition of resources in the library's favor because of higher visibility on campus. There are those who feel that such auxiliary activities cannot be supported in light of present budget crises. PROMO members continue to act on their belief that there is much to be gained in the public relations arena, and not much to lose.

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National Library Week activities for academic libraries

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Last year was the "Year of the Reader" at Western Kentucky.

Early in January 1987, many of us at the Western Kentucky University Libraries became aware of the designation of 1987 as "The Year of the Reader" by both the Congress and the Center for the Book, and that ALA would be promoting National Li-

brary Week with two themes, "Take Time to Read" and "The Year of the Reader." Also, we had been encouraged by the Kentucky Library Association to develop plans for 1987 to promote both "The Year of the Reader" as well as the Kentucky