

## TWO-WAY STRETCH

A former travel promoter and freelance publicist looks at Public Relations for Archives, the problem and the opportunity.

by

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Do you know what the public wants of your institution; and does the public know what you have to offer?

That, in brief, is the two-way give-and-take which your Public Relations can and should provide. If you can give clear affirmative answers to both parts of the question, your institution is on sound ground. Otherwise, your position may need some re-assessment.

You can plot any campaign of advertising or public relations, large or small, if you can make definite answers to four questions:

1. What is your message? may be regarded as question one. It is a question that should and must be answered at the directorial level. Public Relations, from the viewpoint of the director of an institution, is primarily a matter of decision:

- (a) What overall impression do we wish to create?
- (b) What services do we offer?
- (c) Are we presenting ourselves as we really are? If a director cannot answer that one in the affirmative, then there is need for moral, or at least ethical, re-assessment.

2. Whom do you wish to reach? We must now assume that the institution has a PR Officer and distribution of material should fall largely within his field of activity.

From the PR point of view, there is not just one great grey public. There are in fact many publics. How far do you wish to go geographically: Your own community? The Province or region? Or the whole country? Considered from occupational and interest groups you have teachers, students, the professional class generally, writers, historians and just plain history buffs.

Not every story should be aimed at the same groups. One story may have a strong local appeal but will not stand up nationally because the similar thing is being done in other places. But, if you have something that is unique, get the most out of it. The way your institution handles a certain matter may have particular interest to other workers in the museum or archival field. Documents, arcane and obscure, may hold

interest for the serious historian though not for the general public.

Whatever the distribution for a given story, you have now reached an important point. You have broadcast your message -- what you are, what you do, what you offer -- and implicit in that message is an invitation to respond. You have cast your bread upon the waters. Now what will the reaction be?

3. What are the means at your disposal? This brings us to Press Relations, and this should be strictly the province of the PR Officer. "Press" is used here to mean its widest application -- daily papers, weeklies, magazines, radio, television and cable.

A PR Officer, on taking a position, should preferably make a circuit of all the media he intends to use. Failing that, he should meet the press one at a time as opportunity offers. Once the boys know the face behind the signature, then you can mail your stuff and have acceptance.

Also get to know the correspondents for out-of-town papers and the important freelancers in your area.

The PR Officer must bear in mind that his object is always the exact opposite to that of the people with whom he deals. The editors and the newscasters are ambitious and jealous people. They are paid by ambitious and jealous publishers. Their credo must always be: The big story in my paper -- or my radio station -- first. The PR's aim must be: My story in everybody's medium at the same time. They want an exclusive. You want saturation.

To do the job as fairly as possible, study the newscast habits of the radio and television in your area and the press times of the newspapers, always remembering that the electronic media are more flexible than the print media. For instance, if you have an afternoon daily in your town, they probably prefer material by 9:30 a.m. to ensure publication that day. The radio stations can accept up to 11:30 a.m. for broadcast at noon. And again, don't forget to call the out-of-town correspondents.

And don't ever play favorites with a story, giving one outlet a decided edge over the others. If you do, you're dead.

What follows may seem to be a contradiction of that last point, but it isn't: As long as you are announcing an exhibition your institution will open, or a programme it will launch, or an outstanding accession it has recently made, then you are honor-bound to treat all media alike. But if a reporter comes to you with a legitimate story idea of his own, then you are honor-bound to help him and at the same time protect his idea. You must not steal a reporter's idea from his own lips and make it a general release. The "exclusive" in this case is the reporter's.

And about your own writing, confine yourself to a clear, clipped factual statement. Remember a short story in the paper is better than a long one in the waste basket. The newspaper boys don't have time to re-write nowadays. Try to keep your stories down to 500 words, with 800 as an outside limit.

Neither should you ever complain about story treatment. The newspaper and radio business is just that -- a business. And when you cross

a publisher's threshold, you no longer give orders. He does. Your function has been fulfilled when you make a story available in usable form in good time. You are not providing the newspaper or radio station with a service. Rather they are providing you with the facilities of promulgation.

If you have a worthwhile story, you will usually get fair treatment. But the news business is a turbulent one, simply because it must report an unpredictable world. Think for a minute what might happen to a story landing on an editor's desk concurrent with a major accident, fire, flood, robbery or political announcement. The PR who promises that any story will be used is a fool. Good stories are sometimes and the next day a weak one will get a streamer head -- depending upon the news and advertising situation of that day.

Once in awhile, if you have some seniority and know some of the people on the media, you may tactfully alert someone in advance that a certain story is coming and to keep an eye on it, please, just to make sure it does not get buried between two ads on page 15. But not too often.

Up to now, we have been considering the preparation and distribution of our own releases. Occasionally, you must plan for special events complete with VIP's, which may mean live coverage by radio and television. Then your problem becomes largely a physical one -- the placing in advance of lights, cameras, microphones, access to back doors and loading ramps, and a sufficiency of electrical outlets.

Again with radio and television, keep an eye and an ear to the programming. In most stations, news and programming operate off mutually exclusive compartments. This time you are seeking established programmes -- panels, interviews, quizzes -- on which your people could appear as guests.

And a word of caution here: The best interviewer in the world cannot be an authority on every subject. Only some of them do not always realize this. Therefore, draft in advance half-a-dozen good intelligent questions which an interviewer can ask. This will give your candidate a chance to open up and say something worthwhile. Otherwise, the opportunity is often wasted. We have all suffered through programmes which went something like this:

"Ah, let's see now, your name is....ah....Jack McTavish?"

"Yes, my name is Jack McTavish."

"And....ah....you work in the lumber yard, Mr. McTavish?"

"Yes, I work in the lumber yard."

"And....ah....what do you do in the lumber yard, Mr. McTavish?"

"I handle lumber."

And so on and so on for 13 minutes. By that time, Mrs. Hedley Simpson of Orillia is telling us that "Ban takes the danger out of being close" and the whole thing is washed out in a flood of soap flakes.

As you gain acceptance among the people in the field, call them and offer story suggestions that come to your attention, even outside your own terms of reference. This will build your image as a source of news and story ideas. A recent case in point had one archivist virtually acting as a talent scout for a newly-opened cable vision station.

4. How much money do you have to spend? The answer need not be frightening. A museum or an archives has nothing to sell. There is no commercial aspect. It is a public institution rendering a public service. Hence, there is no need for a great advertising budget. For the most part, the media will go along with you. In a case like an exhibition opening, however, where the public is invited, it is both tasteful and tactful to place formal ads in the papers.

The best publicity will not go far today without photography, so always try to have plenty at your disposal, both for the build-up phase of a special event and afterward. In an institution that has a collection of historic photographs, moreover, you may have pictorial support without realizing it. The old photos can often be adapted to illustrate your text matter on an up-coming event. It is simply a matter of adaptation plus a light touch with the cutlines.

True, the newspapers may take their own photos, but these will usually be confined to illustrating their own stories. Do not count on having access to these. Always try to have your own with no strings attached. If you have the right photos plus a little imagination, you may seize an opportunity for national picture syndication.

Therefore, try to get a good photographic item in your budget. Preferably get provision for a good staff photographer and the necessary equipment.

Oh! yes; and don't neglect to get the boss's picture in the paper once in awhile.

That brings us to the only other major items in the PR budget -- the \$15,000 salary of the incumbent and the unlimited expense account.

#### UNIVERSITY COURSES IN ARCHIVES ADMINISTRATION

McGill University Graduate School of Library Science offered during the Spring Term, 1970, Course 645b: "Archives and Records in Libraries". The course was led by John C. L. Andreassen, McGill University Archivist. It was offered as a 3 credit elective to final term students in the two-year course leading to the degree of M.L.S. Subjects dealt with in the first 10 of 12 seminar sessions included:

The Basic Literature; Definitions, Principles and Terminology; Archival Developments in North America; Historical Writings on Various Media; The Selection and Conservation of Writings; Finding Tools and Controls; Records Management Developments in North America; Records Creation, Use, Retention and Destruction; The Records Centre; The Impact of the Computer and Other Related Technological Developments.

The last two sessions were given over to the presentation and defence of seminar papers, based upon selected practical work projects. Fifteen graduate students participated in the seminar.