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Are You PR Impaired? How Would You Know?

Joan Shear

Boston College Law Library, joan.shear@bc.edu

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Are You PR Impaired? How Would You Know?

You might hope that incompetent and ignorant people would be aware of their condition, but social scientists have now confirmed what many of us have always believed: people who haven't got a clue . . . haven't got a clue. A recent study ["Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments," Justin Kruger & David Dunning, 77 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1121 [1999]] showed that people who lack a skill or ability are often completely unaware that they have a deficiency.

I was totally fascinated by this study. They tested people in a variety of areas: grammatical ability, logical reasoning, even sense of humor, and then asked the subjects for their perceptions of their own performances. On every test, in every quartile, people thought they performed above average. While most people slightly misestimated their performance, people at the bottom of the scale had greatly overinflated views of their performance. Furthermore, one of the tests showed that these low performers were able to correctly assess their previous poor performances after being taught the skill being tested for.

The study concluded that in many areas a minimum competency is required to be able to properly judge the adequacy of one's own performance, so that people's self-assessments could not be counted on to accurately determine whether they were in fact competent.

This has also been shown to be the case with library research skills. A recent comparison of computer-assisted instruction versus classroom bibliographic instruction showed neither method was particularly more effective than the other in teaching bibliographic skills. ("A Comparison of Computer-Assisted Instruction and Classroom Bibliographic Instruction," Lucy Holman, 40 *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 53 [2000]). But the researchers were surprised to find that no matter which method of instruction used, people thought they learned a lot more than they had; both methods managed to produce a fairly strong confidence in research ability that was not borne out by objective testing.

Confidence level and competence seem to be inversely associated at times—i.e., the less one is able to do something or the less one knows about it, the more that person has no doubts about his or her own abilities. So a little knowledge can sometimes be a dangerous thing. The most egregious example that comes to mind is the first-year law students hired to work at our circulation desk who, having just learned a few legal research techniques, try to answer complex reference questions because they now consider themselves expert legal researchers.

One of the biggest PR challenges faced by our libraries is reaching minimally competent researchers with the message that there is so much more out there that we, as library professionals, can help them with. We know lots of stuff our patrons don't, and sometimes they don't even know enough to know they need our expertise. We need to use our PR skills to make that evident to them. Poor researchers need to be shown that their research skills aren't up to par, either by showing that they are missing critical information, or if finding everything they need, they are doing it much less efficiently than others. Adult learners need to be convinced that there is something they need to learn before they are willing to expend the energy necessary to learn it. Instruction programs need to be preceded by demonstrations of the tangible benefits of learning a new research skill or tool.

I see the other side of it, too. The most frequent users of reference service are often the most skilled researchers—perhaps because they are doing the most complicated research, but maybe because they may know enough about research to realize that there are all sorts of tools and techniques they haven't learned yet. And they know that we, as professional librarians, may just have something to teach them, which brings me back to my original question: Are you PR impaired?

Remember: if the ability to produce effective PR is the same type of skill as grammatical ability, logical reasoning, or sense of humor, then a significant number of people who think they are doing a fine job aren't performing as well as they imagine.

So if you are PR impaired, how would you know? By following the most valuable PR advice you'll ever get: don't do it alone.

Recognize that your confidence may or may not be justified; you may not be doing "above average." And remember that all you know is not all there is to know; you can always learn more. Therefore no matter what PR activities you are using for your library, they can be made better by involving other people in a number of ways:

Get an extra pair of eyes to edit and proofread anything that speaks for your library. Not everyone can or should edit and proofread everything, but everything can be improved by proofreading. If your usual proofreader is the author of a document or otherwise unavailable, get someone else to do a thorough edit. Even if you are in a one-person library, call on your colleagues, relatives, and friends.

If your public relations program isn't hitting the mark, you may not be in a position to know it, so *build in a feedback loop*. One of the things I make it a point to teach my students is how to tell the difference between not finding something because it isn't there and not finding something because you don't know where or how to look properly. Only by getting feedback from patrons can you ever know that you have achieved enough PR competence to make sure you aren't making a complete fool of yourself, like an unaware tone-deaf person singing at the top of her lungs. Feedback can range from informal conversations with your patrons to a formal survey. Get your patrons to assist in your public relations efforts by letting you know what works and what is just wasted effort.

Get help any place you can. Ask as many people as you can their opinions and take ideas from any source. One of the mottoes in our reference department is "no one of us is as smart or talented as all of us." The projects we do together are always better than the work we produce individually. And besides, it's more fun to do things together. The only way to be sure your PR efforts are the best they can be is to let other people help you. Get a little outside confirmation that you are doing the great job you intend to do.

One great place to learn about PR is through the PR Showcase at the AALL Annual Meeting. If you've had a PR triumph in the past year or two that you would like to share with others, consider displaying it at the PR Showcase at next summer's AALL meeting in Minneapolis.

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If you have something that you would like to display, contact Lucy Curci-Gonzalez (Morgan and Finnegan, LLP, 212/415-8576; lcurcigonzalez@morganfinnefan.com) or me (Boston College Law Library, 617/552-2895; joan.shear@bc.edu) and help us learn from each other.

If you have read this column all the way through, you probably already agree that

we need good PR in our libraries. Chances are you are already doing something about it by producing a library newsletter, or by setting up a current awareness service, or just by trying to document your value to the firm, court, or school you are associated with in more tangible ways. And if you also wonder if your PR efforts are successful, worthwhile, effective, and

positive, good for you. It proves you are on the right track. A little self doubt is good protection against the confidence of the clueless.

Joan Shear (*joan.shear@bc.edu*) is Legal Reference Librarian at Boston College Law Library in Newton, Massachusetts.