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On Target PR

Many of us think we are selling our services and ourselves but our attempts may not always be hitting the mark. Even our best customers seem to have no idea what we are willing and able to do for them. Speaking at this year's AALL Annual Meeting in a program on "Law Firm Management Speaks Out About Their Library Expectations," Karen Knab (executive director of Sutherland Asbill & Brennan LLP) said, "We don't understand your skills, what you do, and how." (L.J. 9/1/99: 121.) And while Perry Glantz (an attorney at Holland & Hart in Colorado who spoke at the same program) admitted lawyers don't know enough about the value librarians bring to the firm, he also wondered, "Is it my fault for not thinking of the library, or the librarians' fault for not being visible?" He said, "We can debate who is responsible and whether it is fair, but the reality is that you need to sell yourself in a competitive environment because no one will do it for you." (L.J. 9/1/99:121.)

Here are some sure-fire ideas for scoring a PR bull's-eye.

Become a Public Relations Sharpshooter

A shotgun approach to Public Relations often misses the mark. A beautiful brochure that lists all the services you offer often gets filed away without even being read by busy faculty members or senior partners. We need to target our audience better and concentrate on SDI—selective dissemination of information. Busy people don't want to be bothered with information that they see as irrelevant. Be selective in who you send announcements to. Send specific information that you know individual users will be interested in instead of general announcements about new information or services. Always keep your target audience in mind and be sure to discuss why this is important for them in particular. Base it on your assessment of their needs now, not some general notion that this would be good for them eventually. It is the least urgent—not least important—thing that gets cut as deadlines close in on people.

Get 'Em in the Cross-Hairs

When we target specific groups, such as journal members and faculty research

assistants, people take advantage of our services such as specialty research classes. Maybe it's because they think it is only worthwhile because we are doing it as a special favor for them. Even though "We're only doin' our jobs, ma'am," we want people to think that we are doing something special for them, because we are. We are using our special knowledge and skills to sort through the morass of information out there to deliver the best information possible in the most efficient manner.

Value Your Marksmanship

Don't sell yourself too cheaply. Our students are entitled to research consultations for as long as they need, but few students take advantage of this service. Yet more than once someone has suggested to me that I offer an hour of research consultation to be auctioned off to the law school community at our Public Interest Law Foundation's annual fundraiser. Some people do see the value in our services. Make sure others know that we know our contribution is valuable.

This is even more important in for-profit situations where the bottom line is the bottom line. Request billing codes to charge for your time when people request research services. People don't value what they can get for free.

Don't Ask the Target to Move

It's not enough to do Public Relations within your library. You are marketing your library and what we can do as librarians whenever you serve on a law firm or law school committee. By being out there and visible, we make it more likely that they will think of us when their thoughts do turn to research.

At Boston College we had a desire to present more bibliographic instruction to our law students in the classroom but no one wanted to take up us on our offer. At the Dean's Christmas Party one year, a faculty member whom I had been working with on a law school project said (more or less), "Now that we're buddies, what can you do to help my seminar students produce better research papers? Would you be willing to come to make a presentation to my seminar next semester?" I almost fell off my chair. He was asking me, as a special favor to him, to do what I had been trying to get a faculty member to let me do for the past few years. Of

course I said yes. And once we did it for one, others saw that we could do it, and wondered could we do it for their classes, too.

Find an Ally Who Can Help Improve Your Aim

A number of years ago a friend was bemoaning that his company, in a cost-cutting move, had decided to get rid of its in-house library staff. As a heavy user of library services, he knew what the bean counters didn't—that the library staff saved him and his clients and the firm lots of money by being efficient and effective researchers. He knew that if he needed to buy that information from an information broker his costs would go up, not down. I said to him, "Don't complain to me. Complain to management and let them know what your out-sourcing information costs will be." The company eventually rehired a library staff because it was just too expensive to be without one. I'm sure that the original library staff had argued just that point, but it didn't hit the target until the end users joined the fight.

Having a faculty member say, "This is important," with both words and actions, such as giving up an hour of class time to your presentation, helps convince the students that research is important. While our bibliographic instruction workshops had been relatively well received, it was still a small percentage of the total student body that was participating. When a faculty member brings us to a class we get a captive audience. Getting the "faculty stamp of approval" increased the number of students we were reaching and increased their general use of library services as well.

Not properly targeting your PR can result in your publications going unread, your seminars being under attended, and staff cutbacks. Let's make sure we're on target by aiming our PR efforts at those who we need to reach, by getting a target in our sights, by having faith in our own abilities, by letting people feel we have done something special for them, by being more visible within the organization, and by encouraging our allies to help us get our message across. Then your PR activities will be sure to hit the mark.

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