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by Joan Shear

Your Public Relations Inner Child

I've been watching a real public relations expert in action lately: my three year old daughter Natalie. She can turn almost any situation into a PR event. I've been trying to figure out the secret of her success. It doesn't hurt that she's cute, but she relies on more than just her good looks to get by. She actually has a whole grab bag of strategies that she applies to get recognition, attention, and other rewards. This month I'd like to help you get back in touch with your inner child and relearn some of the public relations strategies that may have worked well for you, too, when you were young.

Strategy 1: Take pride in your accomplishments.

Natalie is constantly calling attention to some new skill she is mastering, saying, "Look what I did." She sees every accomplishment, even every step in the process, as being worthy of praise and works to elicit the positive feedback she is seeking. Yet somewhere along the line most people were taught to stop bragging and not be so stuck on themselves. Self-centeredness and the accompanying excessive immodesty are not desirable traits, so many of us have over-compensated in our fear of appearing conceited. Rudolph Nureyev obviously kept in touch with his Inner PR Child. He has been quoted as saying, "Modesty is fine for those with modest talent, but to those of us who are truly great, it would only be an encumbrance." I'm not suggesting we achieve his level of ego (then again most of us don't have his level of talent, either), but you see my point. False modesty doesn't really do anyone any good; take a bow when the work you did warrants it.

Strategy 2: Check to see that your message is reaching its target.

One night shortly after Natalie started preschool, she surprised me as I read her bedtime story. After the first page she took the book from me, turned the open pages away and asked, "Everybody see?" as they do during reading circle at school. She knows that it's important to make sure that "everybody gets the picture." Sometimes we get so caught up in what we are doing that we don't take time out to see if it's working. Asking for feedback means risking finding out that even though we put out a great effort, it didn't really have the effect we intended. But the point of public relations is to get your message across, not just send it. You need to know if your efforts are paying off. Build a feedback loop into your PR campaign. Make sure that you are reaching your target audience. Don't assume they're getting the message; ask them, "Everybody see?"

Strategy 3: Don't forget to smile.

Public Relations can also be used to minimize the downside of a poor performance. When Natalie does something she knows she shouldn't, she makes it a point to direct her cutest smile at me. This usually makes it hard for me to stay angry with her. In dealing with the public, you occasionally need to do something unpleasant. For example, you sometimes have to say "no" to a patron. But you can do it in a respectful, helpful, tactful, friendly way. I've had patrons who insisted that only I can help them because I've "always been so helpful in the past" even though I hadn't able to answer their questions. I wondered what they were thinking, since I judge my success as a reference librarian on my ability to provide patrons with the information they need. I hadn't considered myself helpful at all, but they were judging my performance on how pleasant the interaction was for them. It's easy to smile when we perform miracles at the reference desk. It's even more important to remember to smile when our limitations are showing.

Strategy 4: Learn to share.

Natalie has many friends and is well liked. I'm sure that a factor is the way she freely shares toys and even snacks with her friends. The things grown-ups choose to share or hoard sometimes amazes me. One of the best things to share is ideas, but I have known and worked with (although not in a library setting) people who guard their knowledge as if the world will fall apart if they are asked to share it with others. Just as a smile can help compensate for a sub par performance, sharing ideas can generate good will and allies. I have always been proud of the way librarians freely share their knowledge. Law librarians have been sharing their public relations successes at the AALL Annual Meeting since 1992. Frequent contributors have the reputation of being PR giants, but now we know that they're just being good kids.

Strategy 5: If someone offers you a hand, take it.

Natalie is at the age where she wants to try to do things by herself, but as soon as she recognizes that she needs help, she is willing to take hold of our out-stretched arm and accept our assistance. Accepting help is another of those childhood traits that somehow got a bad rap. Some people take pride in the fact that no one helped them. They did it all on their own, but how much better could they have done it if they had the benefit of someone else's thoughts? No one in the world is a good enough writer that he or she can't see some kind of improvement with the help of a good editor. Even our most brilliant ideas aren't created in a vacuum. Sir Isaac Newton wrote, "If I have seen further than [those] who came before, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants." Don't start your PR campaign alone. Start by taking a helping hand from colleagues who have already built successful campaigns.

This year the AALL Public Relations Committee will once again be sponsoring a Public Relations Showcase in the Exhibits Hall. There you'll see examples of materials that promote our profession, our institutions, and our members' activities to our parent organizations, the legal community, other libraries, and the general public. As you plan your trip to Washington, D.C., plan to spend some time at the PR Showcase. Who knows what great ideas these examples can inspire in you?

And while you plan your trip, please consider whether your organization has something it would like to display in the PR Showcase. Don't be afraid to take a bow for work you've done well. Use this opportunity to get some feedback on the effectiveness of your marketing campaigns. Stop in to smile and engage in friendly discussions about effective public relations programs. Practice your sharing skills. And take advantage of this opportunity to benefit from the help of others. Your Inner Child will be proud of you, too.

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