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“C” Is for Communications

by Robert H. Hu

Public relations is essentially about communications — projecting a favorable image to the public. To reach this goal, the party carrying out the PR campaign will often use several communication vehicles to market, promote and advertise itself to the public it serves. Libraries tailor many of these media strategies to communicate with their specific users and publicize their services.

The Newsletter. Many libraries publish a regular newsletter and distribute it to their patrons and the general public. While most libraries do so for practical purposes — such as announcing changes in policies and procedures, recent additions to the collection, changes in staff, new program offerings and research tips — some fail to realize the value of the newsletter as a communications strategy. A well-edited and managed library newsletter can be a powerful tool to promote the library to those it serves.

A successful newsletter must be informative in content, professional in design and consistent in delivery. The best newsletters adhere to four concepts: consistency, conservation, contrast and content, according to Lucy Curci-Gonzalez’s article, “My Excellent Adventure: Across the C’s of the Newsletter Design and Editing,” in the December 2000 issue of AALL Spectrum.

A newsletter’s editorial and design consistency is comforting to the reader. Maintaining the ratio of content to graphics — headlines, text and clip art — will not distract the reader from the content. Editors and designers, however, do incorporate design surprises every now and then to keep the newsletter’s format from becoming boring. But keep those surprises to a minimum, otherwise they lose their impact.

Conservation is defined by a clean, professional look that adds to your newsletter’s marketing value. Don’t become enamored with your desktop publishing program’s bells and whistles. “Littering the newsletter with too many typefaces and graphics detracts from the content,” Curci-Gonzalez writes.

Contrast in newsletter design is essential to lead the reader through the publication, thus illustrating the content. Pull quotes, artwork and photos can initially draw readers to an article. Bold fonts in headlines distinguish them from the body of the article. Initial drop capital letters indicate where the stories begin. White space gives the reader a rest in a particularly text-heavy article. Sidebars should use different headline and text fonts than the main article.

The heart of any newsletter is content. Go beyond publicizing the usual library events and updates. Report on trends that have an effect not only on your library but the library community at large. For example, if your law library is implementing a new internship program, write about how it compares to other internship programs across the country. Profile your law library’s staff and patrons. Incorporate an editorial section in your newsletter to allow readers to convey their opinions about issues that affect the profession.

The Suggestion Box. A suggestion box is a common phenomenon in library land. A box made of wood or metal, with or without a padlock — and sometimes covered with dust — may not immediately strike anyone’s fancy, but the device can be a useful tool for communications. The immediate objective of having a suggestion box is to let the public tell the library how it feels about the library. When a user drops a note in the suggestion box, he or she is sending a message to the library and expects something in return. When the library responds, it is addressing the user’s concern. Doing so engages the library in a dialogue with the user. When executed appropriately, such user communications can help the library build a favorable relationship with its public. Proper administration includes factors such as placing the box in a visible/accessible location; frequently monitoring it; and providing a timely, courteous response to user comments.

When Texas Tech University’s law library started a suggestion box last year, the students put it to good use. There were certainly complaints about the temperature, noise and bathrooms in the library. But the library also received plenty of good ideas for improvement, such as installing power outlets near the study tables so that students could use notebook computers in the library. The staff addressed each concern promptly. In return, the library received several thank-you notes. One student even brought cookies and candies for the staff.

As technology develops, the suggestion box may no longer be limited to a physical device. Some libraries — e.g., Emory University’s Web site at http://www.law.emory.edu/LAW/library.html — are (continued on page 30)
The Accidental Profession continued from page 27

"I had very good on-the-job training at both Loyola and LSU," Whisner said. "The librarians and staff at both law libraries were very supportive of a newcomer to the field. Without that, it would have been hard to prepare for a career in law librarianship."

Internships Pay Off
Earning a master's degree in library and information science in a residency program these days is not for the fiscally faint of heart. For example, in-state tuition at the University of Washington Information School is now more than $7,000 for the four-quarter program; out-of-state students will pay over $17,000. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign charges about $9,000 for its 12-month program for in-state residents and more than $20,000 for out-of-state students. The M.L.I.S. at the Catholic University of America can be earned in a 12-month period at a cost of about $20,000. Add in the possible relocation costs for attending a school away from home and it is no wonder that students are looking for more inexpensive ways to get an M.L.S. When new law librarians see entry-level salaries posted at $40,000 and under, it is understandable that students wonder how they will be able to pay their bills.

To provide students with valuable work experience and financial assistance as well as to recruit more people into the profession, some library schools offer paid internship programs for students pursuing their master's degrees in library science. The intern programs help the students integrate their coursework with the practical experience of working in law libraries. The University of North Carolina and the University of Texas at Austin have provided fellowships, including tuition remission and work experience, for students earning their master's degrees. Indiana University at Bloomington, the University of Washington, the University of Illinois and King County Law Library in Seattle regularly coordinate internship programs for M.L.S. students.

Jim Heller, director of the law library at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., recently created the Law Librarianship Fellow program, which will begin in the fall of 2002. The program is designed to help the law library provide significant legal information services and attract highly qualified people to law librarianship. To qualify for the program, students must have a master's degree in library science and be enrolled in the College of William & Mary's law school. Those selected as Law Library Fellows will work part time in the law library during their three years as a student at the law school. Each Fellow will also receive an out-of-state tuition waiver, which amounted to more than $9,000 in the 2001-02 academic year, and an annual stipend of $4,000.

"We want the Fellows to have a diverse experience during their three years here — one that helps achieve library needs and goals; provides superior service to faculty, students and other library users; and prepares them for a career in law librarianship," Heller said. "Law Librarianship Fellows will work in all three library departments, including reference and providing research support to faculty and students. The library staff will do everything we can to ensure that the program is a success. While the Fellows will help us provide important library services, we also want to ensure that they have an enjoyable and valuable experience during their three years in Williamsburg."

Georgetown University's law library started its Library Resident program in 1999 to recruit new law librarians from under-represented backgrounds. This two-year residency gives M.L.S. graduates the opportunity to work in the law library departments they are interested in and to be mentored by committed professionals. Residents also design and carry out significant research, instructional, or service-based projects in the second year. In addition to a full-time salary for the resident, the program pays for the resident's participation in national and/or regional library associations. (For more information about Georgetown's Library Resident program, please visit http://www.ll.georgetown.edu/lb/resident.html.)

"Our primary goal is to help the resident develop as much as possible," said Janice Anderson, a member of the program's oversight committee. "That way we can contribute both to his or her personal development as well as to the profession. We select someone with an M.L.S. who might not have been working as a law librarian before and start him or her off on the law librarianship path. We provide the opportunity to work with a rich collection, to sharpen reference and teaching skills, to learn from a variety of experienced librarians, and to begin professional networking."

K. Matthew Dames, Georgetown's current resident librarian, was accepted into the program after completing his M.L.S. from Syracuse University in New York. He seriously considered law librarianship as a career while he was pursuing his law degree at Northeastern School of Law in Boston and working at the school's law library. "I decided to apply to the residency fellowship because I figured I had nothing to lose but paper and postage," Dames explained. "As I looked at the program closer, though, it seemed like the perfect first library job. I completed my M.L.S. pretty quickly, and I knew I was lacking some core skills. I figured the Georgetown residency would allow me to cross-train and sharpen my skills in a way that few other situations would."

Dames began his residency in July 2001 working in the reference department. In January, he embarked on a six-month assignment in cataloging. While the future direction of his residency is still open, he and the library plan to further his interest in Web development and information architecture issues, as well as the core competencies of law librarianship.

"There is definitely a need for more of these fellowships [in other law libraries] because application is everything," Dames said. "Good instruction can take you far, but there's really nothing like applying skills in a live environment while having (continued on page 30)
a chance to gain a knowledge base and experience. I have always described this residency as the library equivalent of a judicial clerkship. Almost all former clerks will say their clerkship was an invaluable personal and professional experience. I feel the same way about this residency."

According to many law librarians, the ideal way to prepare for the profession is to take specialized courses in law librarianship, intern or work at a law library, and network with other law librarians. But in reality, most law librarians stumble into their careers without having taken many or any courses in law librarianship. So work experience at a law library and mastery of library skills become vital to law librarianship training.

"Law librarianship can be learned through work experience and continuing education, particularly if a person is working in an academic law library. Having a law degree helps a firm librarian because the education gives the librarian a broader litigation context. My law degree also comes in handy at Georgetown when I get clinical or practical questions."

Dames said. "But the library skills are paramount: You use the library skills to develop answers and alternatives that the patron may not have even thought about. A librarian can't provide answers or help the customer unless he or she has a firm library foundation — like how to do a good reference interview."

**Librarianship Comes First**

"It's important to emphasize that whenever we fill any librarian position, we're looking for a librarian first who knows about the law and legal research," Anderson said. "We're not looking for someone trained in the law who sees being a librarian as just another way to earn a paycheck. We really want a well-rounded librarian who's interested in the big issues, in growing as a librarian, and in contributing to the law library profession."

Thus, to thrive in law librarianship, one must be a talented librarian, first and foremost. Don't underestimate intelligence and the ability to interact with patrons as prerequisites for positions in law libraries. "We first look for someone who is flexible, a team player and who has a great sense of humor," Smith said. "I have always told my classes that I do not necessarily hire the top person with straight A's, but rather the person who understands how the law works, who knows the appropriate resource to use to answer a question, and who is able to think on his or her feet. Common sense is necessary to work at Jenkins County Law Library."

"When we hire librarians at the College of William & Mary, I look for someone who is smart, enthusiastic and motivated," Heller said. "You can't beat that winning combination."

Until library schools develop a model curriculum for law librarianship, the route to a successful law library career can take many twists and turns. However, the combination of law library work experience, coursework and continuing education, as well as resourcefulness and the will to succeed, has proved to be the formula for success.

**Maya Norris (mnorris@aall.org) is director of publications at the American Association of Law Libraries and managing editor of AALL Spectrum.**

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already experimenting with a "virtual box." No matter what form a suggestion box takes, it will succeed as a communications strategy only if managed properly.

**The Web Site.** Most libraries have Web sites although the design and information of these Web sites vary significantly. Typically a library site contains information about the library's hours, online catalog, staff, program and service offerings, and links to other resources. Some Web sites allow searches and transactions, such as reserving books and making payment. In any case, a library's Web site is its presence in cyberspace and may be a user's first encounter with the library before seeing its physical facility and resources. Thus the library Web site stands as a great tool for the library to promote itself and build positive relations with its public.

A Web site that is well designed and maintained can cast a positive image of the library, draw repeat visitors from a larger community, raise usage in both of the virtual and physical resources, and strengthen public support for the library. One of my favorite sites is that of the College of William & Mary law library (http://www.wm.edu/law/lawlibrary/index.shtml). Rich in content, the College of William & Mary's Web site provides research and career guides, technology resources and other useful information. Yet the vast amount of content is well organized and kept up to date. The information is contained in a clean, elegant design that proves easy to navigate.

By contrast, a poorly designed, unkempt site may reflect negatively on the library. It may turn away potential users and eventually erode public support for the institution. Texas Tech University law school's former Web site was unattractive: The home page was disorganized and boring. Much of the content was out of date, filled with many broken links. And there were no graphics at all. Many students and staff complained about the site's lack of functionality and aesthetics. To improve the site, the library redesigned it with a more professional look. The content was updated and reorganized to improve the information's usefulness. More buttons were added for easier navigation. The site used graphics, recognizing the importance of art in supplementing the text. The enhancements, which are still in progress, have enlarged the site and produced positive feedback from students, faculty and staff.

The potential impact of Web sites as a communications/marketing strategy is tremendous if the library is creative and adept in mastering the technology.

**Choose One or More Strategies ... Other Resources**

The newsletter, suggestion box and the Web site are only a few communication media that a library can use to conduct PR campaigns with the public. Sometimes one particular strategy will achieve the desired outcome; at other times, a combination of the strategies may be required to be successful. Each library must develop its own PR/communications plan to meet its particular needs and situation.


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Nominations for AALL Office Sought

The Nominations Committee has begun the process of identifying possible candidates for the 2003 AALL election. Candidates are needed for the office of vice president/president-elect and two Executive Board slots. The Nominations Committee is charged with presenting, to the best of its ability, a slate of candidates reflecting the diversity of AALL's membership. The membership of the Executive Board must maintain a balance of library type, geographic location, gender and minority representation. Additionally, candidates should be well qualified for the position to which they are nominated. How is this accomplished?

Members of the Nominations Committee review lists of AALL members who have served in leadership positions and compile a master list of possible candidates. In addition, the committee solicits input from Special Interest Section chairs and AALL chapter presidents, law-lib and AALL membership listservs. News items, such as this one, seek to include individual members of our Association in the process. The Nominations Committee considers a master list culled from all these sources. Each potential candidate is contacted to determine his or her willingness to serve.

Those willing to be considered are included in a shorter list of potential candidates that is again reviewed by the committee, which matches individual names with available offices, keeping in mind the committee's charge to balance the slate. Each individual on this abbreviated list is called a second time to determine his or her willingness to serve as a candidate for a specific office. From responses to this round of calls, a slate is prepared at the Annual Meeting.

Be a part of the process of selecting AALL leadership for the future. All AALL members are strongly encouraged to submit names to be considered for AALL office by writing any member of the Nominations Committee or AALL Headquarters by April 22.

2002 Nominations Committee

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Dealing with “Challenging” Patrons

This month’s issue of AALL Spectrum is devoted to what might clumsily be referred to as “challenging” users. Libraries exist to serve their users, but it's not always an easy task. There are the usual problems of space, money and time that prevent us from setting up and running the perfect library: a library with exactly what each user needs at exactly the time needed. To reflect those realities, most libraries are tuned, as closely as possible, to meet the predictable information needs of most of their known users. Law libraries most often plan for the user trained in law, someone who will be conducting legal research within a perfectly well-defined boundaries. While law libraries can differ quite a bit in their approach — firm libraries with more business-related materials, academic libraries with more scholarly materials — the basic scope of coverage and intended user is the same.

But there are users who, in one way or another, fall outside the bounds of our normal planning. The first group is one that we can and must make every effort to serve: disabled users. Disabled can face enormous challenges in trying to use the law library. Whether it is an issue of physical access to the library, the ability to physically handle books and other materials, or a need to accommodate a sight-related disability, many obstacles can interfere with the work of disabled library users.

Unfortunately, libraries and librarians have not always been as concerned as they should be about the problems faced by disabled users. Whether it is a lack of concern, a fear of the expense and bother of creating reasonable accommodations, or a dislike of altering procedures or policies for a particular group of users, some librarians have resisted or avoided doing what they can to create accessibility. This needs to change. We should each be doing everything in our power to make our libraries as accessible as possible. As Mary Rumsey points out in her excellent article in this issue, a good place to start is by talking to disabled users about their needs and experiences. Good will, clear communication and solid effort can solve 99 percent of the problems.

Then there are users who are challenging in other ways. Some are people who are trying to use the law library without the training and experience we expect. Others are people who, while highly trained in law, might be called “socially impaired.” Then there are another group of users who are overwhelmed by their own problems or needs and hope to find help in the law library.

Such users sometimes cause problems of a purely interpersonal nature. Some may be rude, angry or just difficult. They may require special handling by library staff, both defensively and offensively, as librarians try to diffuse the situation, protect themselves and others, and still deliver legal information services. Donald Arndt’s article provides a variety of suggestions for balancing the needs of such users with the needs of the library and its staff.

When the day is done, we all have stories and experiences about dealing with challenging users. Some are sad, some are funny, and some are hilarious. We have collected a few anecdotes for your enjoyment. The stories are not intended to poke fun at any particular group or type of users but to reflect the humorous and interesting interactions that dealing with the public always entails.

Next month, we will feature our annual architectural issue of interesting building and remodeling projects in law libraries across the country. Our request for writers interested in sharing a recent project received many enthusiastic responses, and we selected five that looked most interesting. We hope you’ll enjoy it.

CS SIS Offers Annual Meeting Grants

The Computing Services Special Interest Section is pleased to announce a grant opportunity for AALL members. The CS SIS is offering at least three grants to attend the AALL Annual Meeting and Conference. The grant application is available through the CS SIS Web site, http://www.usc.edu/dept/law/cs-sis.html. Grant applications for the upcoming AALL Annual Meeting and Conference are due by April 15. Any interested AALL member is invited to apply as soon as possible. Please contact Susan M. Boland, CS SIS Grants Committee chair, at 815/753-9492 or at sboland@niu.edu, with any questions.