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Program advocacy: The missing element

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There is ample evidence in both education and librarianship that few members of the public are aware of the nature and scope of library service for young people and that few administrators are aware of the potential of quality programming for this group of users. Regrettably, while one might charge librarians with responsibility for this situation, it is only these same librarians who can bring about needed change. Collectively, it is still possible to develop support for programs, services and growth but it is individuals who have to articulate the value of the program, provide visible evidence of use and prove the essential nature of the service. The day has passed when system-level advocates can protect and promote services and positions on their own. The scrutiny of expenditure includes the individual school and the individual library. Are we prepared for this challenge or are we perhaps too complacent, too conservative, too timid . . . even too uncommitted? Clearly, a more positive and professional approach than talking only to each other and belabouring the problems of the ages is needed in order to gain support for the maintenance and extension of services and programs.

A key element in any strategy for change is effective program advocacy with a vigorous public relations program. This advocacy is based on a systems approach to development: planning, research, examining alternatives, formulating strategy, monitoring, modification, evaluation. Time and financial resources must be allocated to public relations activities, and this is not just advertising or promotion for these are only two of the tools needed to develop an informed network of support within the institution and the community. Public relations starts with planning and fact finding; it emphasizes effective communication when and where it counts and requires objective evaluation. Most important, public relations, like any emerging service priority, begins with an attitude of self-analysis. Why are we involved in education and/or librarianship to start with? How committed are we to library service to youth? How convinced are we of the need to “market the product”?

A program of action requires a solid philosophical foundation to be successful. It also requires the self-confidence necessary to speak well for youth and the skills essential for good communication. Do we have a clear, logical response for the administrator or trustee who questions the value of storytelling, story reading or puppetry? Do we leave the impression that these are simply traditional programs or entertainment or can we articulate their important contributions to creativity, language acquisition and reading readiness, when planned and implemented with professional expertise? Do we have a clear and logical response when queried about the value of outreach for young teenagers by the administrator or trustee who forgets that library use drops dramatically at age twelve, during the critical years in the development of lifelong readers?

What are the system’s written goals of library service for young people? What are the objectives for this year? Are they recorded anywhere? Are they specific and manageable? What are the major strengths and weaknesses of our program? What should be changed and improved? What can be improved most easily?

It is important to identify the specific audiences that we are trying to reach and the best approaches to addressing them. Surely we would promote our services differently with each of a group of young adults, a group of librarians, the system’s administrators, and a community organization. Who is it that we’re trying to reach in the branch, the school, the district, the community? What approaches are we using?
Which have been most successful with each group? With this background information alternatives in a concerted public relations program can be carefully planned and well implemented.

Granted, special skills need to be developed. Why don’t our systems conduct sophisticated training sessions for staffs on leading workshops with community and professional groups, public speaking, the wide variety of methods for promoting programs and how to develop political awareness?

It is almost axiomatic that librarians need to become politicized for this is the era of special interest groups and lobbies. The library voice for the needs of young people must not be muted. When did you last attend a meeting of your board? Do you ensure through your associations that these public meetings are held in the evening when members of the public and staff can attend? In my experience as a library trustee members of staff rarely attend meetings, few members of staff ever introduce themselves to trustees, and no member of staff ever button-holes trustees to provide them with useful information or to elicit support. Has your group considered dividing responsibilities for improving the knowledge and support of individual trustees and administrators? Have you recognized what some call a “legislative liaison” obligation? Have you established an influential advisory committee (a “friends” group) on service for young people? Have you encouraged the appointment of a young adult to the public library board? Have you asked elected trustees at open meetings what they will do to improve library service for young people? Without regard to the myriad of labour concerns, have you involved adult volunteers in your programs? Schools and libraries know that these individuals can be their best ambassadors in the community.

These and similar techniques cannot fail to encourage continuing support for service for youth and to assure that this service holds a rightful place in the library list of priorities.

Program advocacy is for believers. It requires commitment and dedication to the continuation of the service as well as to the best performance tomorrow on the job. It also requires an objective recognition of the essence of power and how it pervades the workplace. Service does not sell itself; librarians must inform decision-makers of the value of their service and the need for adequate funding. Bridges should be built for support before it is crucial and then used again and again in an informed and supportive communication network.

Start with small groups and build influential contacts. If we really believe in the product then we must get out and sell it! It is crucial that we be articulate and assertive. If we don’t speak for the best library services for the young, no one will.

Ken Haycock is coordinator of library services for the Vancouver School Board and a Past President of both the Canadian Library Association and the Canadian School Library Association.