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Managing Library Public Relations

An Interview with Marcia Schneider

Eric C. Shoaf



Marcia Schneider

Effectively managing the public relations (PR) factor is a key element in library administration. What can be, at times, the somewhat unexciting work of planning for fundraising or publicizing literacy efforts can, at other times, be a real challenge. What if the institution opens a new main library branch and both public and staff opinion is decidedly negative? What if controversy over the design and funding of the

facility erupts? Or if a well-known author accuses the library of dumping books in a misbegotten weeding project—what then? That is exactly what Marcia Schneider, director of public affairs at the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL), faced soon after the new main library building was opened to the public in April 1996.

Schneider started working for SFPL in January 1974. A large part of her career was spent in the branch libraries, and she was chief of branches from 1994 to 1998. Schneider first started working in library administration in 1989 as community relations librarian, and both the job and title were upgraded in 1994.

Many will remember the uproar that was documented in professional journals and included accusations of mismanagement, low staff morale, bad design, and book dumps. In time the furor passed and was shown to be one of misperceptions rather than poor administration. Still, the library director eventually resigned. This was a challenging time for any SFPL staffer, more so for the one in charge of PR. Schneider shares her experiences and lessons.

Q: What sort of publicity was originally planned for the opening of the new main library in San Francisco? Did you have specific goals for the project?

A: To put it in context, the San Francisco Main Library came to be during a difficult economic time. The main

library was overcrowded, its grandeur had been overshadowed by nearly a century of grime, and the city's financial difficulties led to reduced operating hours and threatened closures of branch libraries. In 1988, San Francisco voters stepped up to the plate to improve the library, approving a \$109.5 million bond measure to construct the new main library and provide seismic upgrades to a handful of branches.

The economic downturn, however, continued through the mid-1990s, and supporters feared that the new main library would open as a bare-bones operation. In order to provide funding to buy furniture and equipment for the new building and provide enhancements in the finishes of the interior of the building, a group of supporters founded the Library Foundation of San Francisco, with the charge of raising an additional \$30 million for these enhancements.

These supporters wanted to see a magnificent event for the opening of the new library. The goal was to put the library on the map with other civic and cultural organizations, including the newly opened San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as well as the San Francisco Ballet, Opera, and Symphony. By drawing attention to a great new building and its features, it was hoped to attract new users, supporters, and donors to the institution.

San Francisco has a wealth of PR firms, many of which specialize in special events, and one of these firms, Staton, Hughes, and Shafer, was selected to publicize the main library opening. I worked very closely with a principal in this firm, Scott Shafer, who now hosts the "California Report" on KQED Radio, a PBS affiliate. Scott did much of the heavy lifting for the event, opening doors and pitching story ideas to the media. My role was to facilitate interviews, provide tours, and prepare backgrounders, among other things. Scott was a wonderful colleague, and the two of us worked very well together. We had some absolutely amazing and positive press coverage for the grand opening.

Q: As public reaction became negative, how did you respond? Did you revamp your message?

A: Negative publicity was not a new thing to me. Shortly after I assumed responsibility for PR for SFPL in 1989, we had a huge flap when it came to light that an

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organization of pedophiles was holding a monthly meeting in a branch meeting room. The clear solution to negative publicity is to fix the problem, whatever it might be. However, changing a policy and guidelines for use of a meeting room is a whole lot easier than dealing with negative publicity about a building with deficiencies. Fixing a building takes time, and is still a work in progress.

One of the difficulties dealing with the new main library story was that public reaction did not become negative until months after the building opened, and it was hard to know which problems were real and which were perceived. The library system as a whole was undergoing enormous change at the time. Stories of deficiencies in the new online catalog or about books that had been weeded from branch libraries over the past twenty years prior to the opening of the main library became confused with real structural and operational deficiencies of the building. It was especially difficult for me, because I was also serving as chief of branch libraries from 1994 to 1998 and was not that intimately involved with the problems of the main library. It took a while to sort it all out and to separate the perceived problems from the real problems.

To this day, there are urban legends surrounding the San Francisco Main Library. Some are firmly entrenched in common belief. For instance, the book-weeding story occasionally has the main library discarding half its collection, and sometimes even more books than we owned. It reaches the point of absurdity.

Our message today is that this is a building that functions well and continues to improve. People vote with their feet about how they feel about the building; 5,500 people a day walk through the doors of the main library. Attendance at programs and exhibitions reached record highs last fiscal year. The most important and critical of the recommendations of the post-occupancy evaluation are being implemented, and numerous small but significant changes have been made by staff to improve the functionality of the building.

Q: What is the process of implementing your PR program for the new main library?

A: The opening of the new main library was the largest PR project that I was ever responsible for, and it was both exciting and a little scary at the same time. I was fortunate to have such talented and professional support. In addition to the PR services, we also had an event management firm for the event itself. I served as the chief liaison between these two services in addition to providing communications for the opening.

Clearly, a lot of planning goes into such an endeavor. I served on a small committee that selected the PR firm about nine months prior to the opening. Because we were not using [San Francisco] city money, we didn't go through the normal procedures of issuing an RFP, which would have been more time-consuming, but rather preselected

several of the better-known firms and invited them to make presentations. The firm of Staton, Hughes, and Shafer put forward the best proposal. In terms of communications, nine months preceding the event was not a minute too soon to begin. In fact, for some of the national publications, we had already missed deadlines.

The event management firm also held a series of meetings in the months prior to the opening, taking care of such matters as planning the timeline and the details of the event, and identifying the principal players. The number of planning documents involved was awesome. Not even the smallest details were left to chance, from the coffee tent to the performers to the invitations to the order of speakers; who sat on the platform and who sat to the side, and so on.

PR for opening a new building is consistent with any PR program, large or small. It needs to start with a plan, including goals and objectives, target audience, a timeline, and a budget. Who are the target media? Which are the stories that will appeal to them? Roles and responsibilities of the implementation team need to be identified, including spokespeople. What are the key messages? What will be the hook for building and conveying the story?

That said, there were multiple layers of complexity to our event. There were many principal stakeholders involved in all levels of the endeavor: the Library Foundation of San Francisco and its lead donors; a PR committee of high-end donors; the capital campaign co-chairs; the mayor and other key politicians; the Friends of SFPL; the library commission; and library staff. The imaginative and connected campaign co-chairs had a big role in the more high-profile elements of the opening, such as the skydiver who jumped from high in the air to deliver to the mayor the key to open the library. I attended a lot of meetings, but I don't think I attended a single meeting at which all the players gathered at the same table. This is where the professionalism and expertise of the consultants played a big role.

Q: Many library staff also had a negative reaction to some of the systems in the new building. How did you go about securing their support?

A: It has now been seven years and several library administrations ago since the main library opened. I believe that today the library operates in a greater spirit of inclusivity and open communication. Main library staff had a large role in suggesting changes and improvements to the building, which are documented in the post-occupancy evaluation of 2000. Some of these recommendations currently are being implemented, and some may never happen. The library purchased a new building a few blocks away from the main library, and a number of behind-the-scenes units will move to this building, freeing up space within the main library for more public services. There undoubtedly still are functionality issues with the building, but staff is part of the solution.

Q: Are you satisfied with the outcome?

A: As stated earlier, this is still a work in progress. The building will continue to have its own unique character and issues, just as the old main library had. Staff works around these issues to deliver the best possible public service at all times.

Q: Now that the furor has died down, what sort of publicity programs are in place for SFPL?

A: We are not currently involved in any one major, all-encompassing campaign, such as the opening of the main library. By contrast, there is a wide-ranging wealth of activities and services; sometimes it is difficult to know where to begin. Our single biggest emphasis right now is the implementation of a \$106 million bond program approved in November 2000 to renovate nineteen branch libraries and build five new ones. Multiple projects are in the pipeline simultaneously, and part of our PR work is to help get the word out to the community about planning meetings, such as soliciting comment on the building programs and hosting opportunities to meet the architects.

Each project is being carefully planned with a lot of community involvement. That does not mean that there will not be controversy. This is, after all, San Francisco. I've been working on media alerts, press releases, and stories about the branch improvement program for the neighborhood press outlets, as well as co-editing a bond newsletter. Eventually, we will move on to groundbreakings and grand reopenings, which are great fun to plan and work on.

Another major effort for my unit is publicity for our exhibitions and public programs. We put on about ten major exhibitions a year in our two galleries in the main library, many of which involve partnerships and collaborations with other organizations. Currently, we have on display a stunning exhibition of photographs on natural caves that has been a crowd pleaser and attracted a lot of good press. In partnership with the Friends and Foundation, I co-edit the library's newsletter, which focuses heavily on our programs and exhibitions.

We are also pushing forward on a number of new publications. I've just developed a prototype for a branch brochure, which will be individualized for each of our branch libraries. Updating our main library service brochures is also a priority, as well as developing new generic press and general informational materials about the library.

Q: Are publicity publications for the library affected by difficult economic times?

A: Our PR budget is relatively small compared with the overall budget, and we also receive funding from our Friends and Foundation. We do very little advertising, and most of our flyers and publications are designed and printed in-house. Occasionally we are able to splurge and

print banners for a special exhibition. Big splashy publicity is not within our budget, nor does it seem appropriate at this time.

Q: How does one find a balance between PR geared for institutional stakeholders and that for the public at large?

A: Every one of us in today's world has to wear many hats and find a balance between competing priorities. It involves working harder, working smarter, and addressing problems as they arise. Although the most visible PR efforts are directed externally, good internal communication is critical to success and therefore equally, if not more, important.

Q: How does one approach PR as far as staff is concerned, as opposed to the public at large? What is the same and what is different?

A: Specific to my department—the public affairs department—we are here to support the library's public services. We publicize the library's programs and services through printed materials, press releases, graphics and printing, meeting room management, audiovisual support, exhibitions, and public programs. The staff is our client, and we work on its behalf to let the public know about the good work that it does. Because of my long history of working in this institution, many library staff members know me from having worked with me in the past. This helps facilitate good communications, which is essential to providing the services that people need.

In a more general sense, staff PR is about good management, mutual respect, and good communications. I feel that we have that within the SFPL system.

What we do in public affairs is just a small piece of external PR. Every single person who works for the library and meets with the public is part of PR for the library. Whether it is the city librarian meeting with other department heads, the mayor, members of the public, or the library commission, or the front line technician who checks out library materials to a library user, we are all PR professionals. Working with the public and the press pretty much boils down to the same issues: management, respect, and communication. We are all ultimately responsible for delivering good public service.

Q: How has technology affected PR in terms of what can be accomplished in-house versus using specialty vendors? Can PR do more with less, or is this a fallacy?

A: Technology is an asset to communications. More and more we are sending press information, including photos and graphics, in electronic format. Our work today is a combination of phone, fax, e-mail, snail mail, and personal meetings. Technology helps facilitate communication, but actual communication still needs to come from people.

However, perhaps I am not clear what you mean by specialty vendors. We produce most of our work in-house, but this does not mean doing more with less. We need our graphic artists, our PR officer, our media production crew, and audiovisual specialists to get the job done. Most of the work is about people. Still, there are times when it makes economic sense to have something produced outside, such as an exhibition-sized mounted poster, even when the artwork is produced internally.

Q: *What lessons can you share with others about how to respond to a PR crisis?*

A: One of the best ways to prepare for a crisis is to imagine the worst possibilities: floods, fires, tornados, and earthquakes; sudden and life-threatening illnesses or accidents; guns and bomb threats; terrorism. Add to the mix any number of possible management crises, such as budget shortfalls, theft within the institution, angry members of the public. Then there are controversial issues involving community values and professional ethics, such as filtering, weeding, and book censorship. The possibilities for crisis are endless, yet real crises rarely occur exactly as imagined. Nevertheless, the best possible response to a crisis is carefully planned before the crisis occurs.

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LA&M Editorial Advisory Board will be looking at ways to provide a Web presence for *LA&M*, with access available for LAMA members and subscribers. A program showcase is being developed. It will consist of content and images from selected Annual Conference programs. The showcase will make information from programs available to those unable to attend Conference, and promote LAMA by highlighting its excellence in programming.

Emphasis will continue to be given to keeping our association current on governmental affairs and key issues in library and information science. Activities that foster the development of the library profession and that promote diversity and equal access to information will continue to

This is why it is important to develop a plan for each of these scenarios, determine roles and responsibilities within your institution, determine an appropriate spokesperson. Who is responsible for emergency evacuation, emergency freeze-drying of water-damaged books, tending unattended young children, or soothing a frantic parent or relative? A crisis team with a communications component should already be in place and ready to spring to action.

I am enormously proud to work in one of the greatest and most beneficial democratic institutions in our society: a public library. Our mission and goals are clear. But sometimes things happen that take us by surprise and for which we are unprepared. It is important to do a careful analysis of each situation before making a response, while bearing in mind that a timely response to the press is required. It is an enormous balancing act in which common sense and good judgment at all levels are essential.

There is a certain amount of cynicism in our society about government in general, and even libraries are not excluded from the skepticism. This is why I believe in being forthright about whatever it is that is going on. Being honest and being strategic are not at all incompatible. And, while planning strategically for long-range goals, it is important just to take one day at a time, working through the issues.

be central to LAMA's mission. Planning will receive great emphasis. LAMA will participate fully in ALA initiatives, including ALA's 2006-10 strategic planning process.

I am very appreciative of the opportunity to help lead LAMA over the next year. Working on appointments to division committees and task forces has given me a chance to talk to many LAMA colleagues about the association, the challenges it faces, and its potential for new achievements. I hope to continue and widen that dialogue over the next year. The LAMA board of directors will endeavor to make the next year one of reflection, discussion, and commitment to the promotion of our association and the needs of its members.