

Just the Facts, Ma'am:

How to Get the Best Press for Your Library

by

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Conference Abstract: Need to connect more effectively with the media? Create publicity that will create a “buzz” of interest and support from your community? In this program, we will discuss where to find great ideas and templates for writing library press releases, and we’ll discuss case studies from successful press releases and marketing campaigns.

Successful public relations efforts begin with a strategic plan, stand out with winning press releases, and flourish with effective marketing techniques. This article will cover all of the key elements of a successful public relations effort.

Learning To Think Strategically about Outreach Efforts

Before you begin planning any kind of outreach effort, you should ask yourself at each stage of the process the following question: What do you want and who can help you get it? Your answers should define both your goal and your primary audience for whom your outreach efforts are tailored.

There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which doesn't need to be done.

Most outreach efforts, of course, don't require the strategic thinking and background research that a public relations campaign demands, and yet focusing your outreach efforts to promote your library's programming is vital to the success of your library, and it should be seen within a larger context of library promotion. A campaign is a comprehensive effort to promote specific goals to specific audiences.

No campaign can be everything to everybody without losing impact. One of the challenges that librarians faces when promoting an event or program is the diversity of audiences to which it must speak. Let's look at a couple of campaigns to better understand their dynamics, their ingredients, and their purposes. Hopefully this will help you be more effective in your promotions.

Before the American Library Association's Campaign for American libraries campaign launched in April 2001, the public relations firm that designed the campaign did extensive interviews with patrons and library constituents to grasp different audience's perceptions of libraries and to identify a specific "problems" which an informational campaign could then attempt to correct. They learned that while libraries are popular and well regarded in many communities, they tend to be taken for granted, are often not visible, and face evolving problems.

ALA's subsequent @ your library® campaign is a 10-year multi-prong informational campaign designed to highlight the value of public, school, academic and special libraries and librarians in the 21st century. The campaign's goal, according to ALA, is "to increase awareness about the vibrancy, vitality and real value of today's libraries, to galvanize public support and ultimately influence public policy and impact funding."

Specifically, they developed a public relations campaign that set clear goals and objectives based on ALA's goals. Their goals were driven by desired outcomes, which were measurable, and all related tasks supported particular objectives of the campaign. Several complimentary campaigns were launched in the next year or two including the School Library Campaign, the Academic and Research Library Campaign, and the Smartest Card Campaign. These "tailored" campaigns address different needs and provide structure for maximizing the outreach to each audience. Consider the case of the ACRL.

The Academic and Research Library Campaign placed a series of ads in the Chronicle of Higher Education between 2001–2005 to promote the importance of librarians in teaching and research. Messages were "aimed at campus decision-makers and profile the value and strength of librarians and libraries in meeting the knowledge demands of faculty and students."

Recipe for a successful public relations campaign

Let's breakdown the components of a campaign and define some terms that make up the "recipe" for creating a public relations plan:

- **OBJECTIVES:** Specific, measurable, attainable, and time-bound results that are used to determine whether or not the campaign goal was achieved.
- **KEY AUDIENCE:** A group of people whose involvement is needed to achieve campaign goals and objectives.
- **MESSAGE DESIGN:** Formulate messages that incorporate your audience's self-interests so they will want to support campaign objectives.
- **STRATEGIES:** General plans for communicating public-specific messages to each key public.
- **TACTICS:** Specific communication tools that carry the public-specific messages to the targeted public.
- **CALENDAR:** Organized by public and strategy with each tactic scheduled.
- **BUDGET:** Should project the cost of each tactic. Should indicate where donation or other income will offset the cost.
- **EVALUATION CRITERIA:** Restate the campaign objectives as a measure of success.
- **EVALUATION TOOLS:** Specific tools to measure the achievement of each of the campaign objectives.

Target Audiences

To learn about target audiences, let's look at ALA's Campaign for America's Libraries. Much of the following material is directly quoted from the website at <https://cs.ala.org/@yourlibrary/targetaudiences.cfm>.

No campaign can be everything to everybody without losing impact, and three target audiences were identified for the national campaign. The three primary target audiences for the ALA campaign were

1. Users/Potential users;
2. Influentials (intermediaries); and,
3. Catalysts.

Users or potential users included students—from grade school through post-graduate education, who were considered key to the future of libraries. "Developing comfort, familiarity, positive feelings, and reliance on libraries

at a young age helps ensure loyalty and support throughout one's life. Thus, students are an audience group that is important to all four "mini" campaigns."

Parents were the other user group identified, in large part because adults' warmest feelings toward libraries were formed as children.

Influentials

Influentials are a group or individual used as a message channel to reach and influence an audience.

ELECTED OFFICIALS: This campaign must educate this target audience about the important benefits of libraries to individuals and society and the need for continued and increased funding.

SCHOOL BOARDS/ADMINISTRATORS: The campaign must proactively reach out to this audience group to ensure that libraries are top-of-mind when they make critical decisions about funding and/or programs.

SENIOR CITIZENS: Senior citizens, in addition to being a strong user group for libraries, also have tremendous collective influence with elected officials. Indeed, as the baby boom ages, seniors will comprise a larger and larger proportion of the voting public. This campaign must proactively educate this audience group about the valuable role and service libraries can and do play in their lives. This foundation of understanding and support is critical to ensure that this constituency can be leveraged and engaged on critical funding or advocacy initiatives.

Catalysts

A catalyst is a substance that speeds up a reaction without itself being transformed or consumed by the reaction. The catalysts that ALA identified were:

ALLIES/PARTNERS: Because libraries have always enjoyed very strong public support as well as an incredibly strong grassroots network, finding allies and partners has been a relatively easy task. The difficulty is finding partners and allies where there is equal or greater value and benefit in the partnership to ALA as there is to the partner. This campaign must help prioritize and evaluate potential partners to ensure that they are being made with a strong strategic rationale and that they support the goals and objectives of this campaign.

EDUCATORS: Since libraries serve a fundamental educational role in our society, educators (e.g., teachers, college faculty, school boards, administrators, education policy experts, etc.) are critical targets as they represent the front lines of support for libraries. This campaign must ensure that this group understands the role and value of libraries and that they are engaged in the active promotion of libraries.

MEDIA: This campaign must ensure that journalists not only develop positive feature stories about libraries, library services, and librarians, but that they also appreciate their role and value and understand when to call ALA spokespeople to lend a voice to an emerging story.

Case Study: The Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners

Another useful case study of an effective public relations campaign is one initiated by the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners ([2006](#)). This board launched a strategic planning process to improve library services across the state for 5-10 years. They began inviting members of the library community to participate in “key issues forums” where they gathered stories that spoke about how various libraries helped individuals succeed, how existing programs might be improved, and what kinds of new programs should be offered.

Selecting, then defining key issues was the first step that the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners used in their strategic planning process. They traveled the state and gathered input from patrons, the library community, and the public. After several months of efforts, they came up with a framework to guide their campaign, including creating tasks for committees, specific goals and objectives for each key issue, and, finally, implementation plans for their goals and objectives. This campaign is ongoing and is an excellent case study for those seriously interested in studying how a campaign should be designed, organized, and implemented.

Now that you have identified the audience for your public relations campaign and have your strategic goals firmly in mind, it is time to implement a tried-and true publicity tactic—writing a press release for an upcoming event.

Writing an Effective Press Release

The following are a selection of tips on writing a press release.

Use wide margins and double spacing in press releases unless you are sending them out via email. Include your organization's logo. Put the date when news organizations may release the material in all caps. If applicable, include the time for release as well. If the release may be sent out at any time, state "RELEASE IMMEDIATELY" or "RELEASE AT WILL." Include one contact person with title and phone number where messages can be left, if necessary.

Include a suggestion for a headline. It should be one line or approximately eight words and use descriptive, active verbs. Be sure your organization's name appears at least once in the headline. Include a subtitle as needed.

Make sure to hook the audience with the first sentence. What is the "best way to find that hook? By asking yourself 'So what?' To find a good angle, put yourself in the shoes of newspaper and magazine readers not affiliated with your organization. Why should they care about your news? How will they benefit from what you're publicizing? What problem can it help them solve? How does it relate to their own lives and personal interests? In other words, so what?" ([Khalife](#), 2000).

For example, one recent press release from the Amputee Coalition of America (see figures 1 and 2) began, "Because most amputees and professionals do not have the time or resources to stay current with news and studies dealing with limb loss, the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) and the National Limb Loss Information Center (NLLIC) are pleased to offer several information solutions, our PubMed © abstracts and Topic of the Month e-publications." This press release clearly addresses the needs of the audience. Later it calls for the reader to view the ACA website and or sign up for e-mail publications. It is always a good idea to include a call to action.

Press releases should jump straight to the point and develop the story "backwards." State the main point at the beginning and then reveal the rest of the information from the most important to the least important. Your first sentence, the lead, should act like a hook and grab the reader's attention. Try to get the message across as succinctly as possible.

In the first paragraph, include the five W's - Who, What, Where, When, and Why. Also cover How. For many press releases, the only content you need

is the lead sentence and one or two additional sentences with event details. Keep it concise but still give it some pizzazz.

Usually press releases do not include photographs, but if you do choose to submit one, find out if the newspaper wants a black-and-white or color photograph, and submit a high-quality one. Include a typed caption with appropriate identification information adhered to the back. Do not use a paper clip or staple to attach the photo to the press release; simply put the photo with the press release in an envelope.

Use a short, lively quote by your third paragraph. If possible, refer to some previous event or accomplishment that never got covered so that it can receive the press it deserves.

If you have additional materials you could make available to interested journalists, let them know what they are and whom to contact.

If your press release includes more than one page, include “—more—” or “continued” at the bottom of the first page. Put an identifying header on top of the second page in case it becomes separated from page one. Put “# # #” or “END” at the end of the release.

Create a standard paragraph that you can include at the bottom of all press releases that describes your organization and its mission.

Always make sure that you and someone else reread and edit the press release. Double-check all facts, dates, names, spelling, and grammar. Ask yourself the following questions about the press release: Is it clear and informative? Does it speak to the general public? Does the headline and lead grab you and make you want to find out more?

Once the press release is ready to be sent out, make sure and send it to all of the relevant publications in the area. The following links provide resources for identifying relevant publications.

- Media Contacts for a Variety of Publications
<http://www.nsls.info/resources/marketing/MediaContacts.aspx>
- Media Guides for Purchase
<http://www.nsls.info/resources/marketing/MediaContacts.aspx>
- Tennessee Newspapers
<http://newslink.org/tnnews.html>

- Tennessee Press Association – Find a Member
<http://www.tnpress.com/membership/tndata/memsearchform.asp>

Now you have written that killer press release, but you are not yet done. Remember, it's all about the audience. Where are you going to market and distribute that news release?

Marketing and Distribution that Works

Learning to use “viral marketing” is key. “What does a virus have to do with marketing? Viral marketing describes any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message’s exposure and influence. Like viruses, such strategies take advantage of rapid multiplication to explode the message to thousands, to millions” ([Wilson](#), 2000).

Being viral means creating a buzz. Start with your staff. Your staff is your frontline. Prepare them to talk about the event and encourage them to share the plans with others. If your staff is too busy or hesitant to plug your initiatives, a simple button or sticker saying “Ask me about...” can ensure the conversation gets going.

Talk up your event to patrons, friends, and family. Ask enthusiastic patrons to spread the word. Hand out not one but two flyers to interested parties, asking them to share one with a friend or hang one on a community bulletin board. Better yet, give them three flyers - one for them, one for a friend, and one for a bulletin board posting. This is an easy way to get a presence in your community’s lunch rooms, senior centers, department offices, student lounges, and churches.

Viral marketing also works in today’s high-tech world. You can modify the press release you worked so hard on and e-mail it to employees and community partners, post to a news section on your website, post it to electronic distribution lists (aka Listservs), and assign a RSS feed to your site so that subscribers will pick up your new release as soon as it is available. Ask community partners to post your events on their corporate, community, and personal websites and blogs. Make sure they link back to the information being promoted on *your* website.

You can also create a subscription list or your distribution list. Create a distribution list in your address book by collecting e-mails for opt-in inquiring minds.

You might also have a number of community contacts that are willing to post regular information from you; send them a PDF and you will know that they are printing it and posting it. A good place to start is your “other” local public/school/college/hospital libraries.

Remember to use e-mail etiquette and don't sign anyone up for a distribution list unknowingly. Always include a way to get off the distribution list in each e-mail, but always include a way to sign up for the list as well. Always blind copy the recipients' e-mail addresses. Put yourself in the recipient's In-box; don't overwhelm them with too many messages. Never share e-mail addresses with third parties. For more advice, see the “The ‘Ins & Outs’ of E-Mail Press Releases” ([RN](#) 1997).

Distribute your news to weekly papers, specialty papers, flyers, newsletters, church bulletins, local TV shows, event calendars, community boards, public access channels, and local community radio stations.

If you haven't already, take some time and survey the resources that your community has to offer, such as those resources listed above. Type up a list of marketing outlets and keep it handy. Include contact or submission information, regular deadlines, personal contacts, and preferred formats.

Evaluating your success

There is one final step to creating a successful marketing effort, and that is evaluation. As Friedrich Nietzsche said, “Evaluation is creation: hear it, you creators! Evaluating is itself the most valuable treasure of all that we value. It is only through evaluation that value exists: and without evaluation the nut of existence would be hollow. Hear it, you creators!”

In an evaluation, you can count participants, calculate demographics, and gauge the potential for future initiatives. Think of businesses. They have standard marketing evaluation methods. They pay close attention to sales numbers, sales cycles, and new customers. You need to think like a business as well. How many people signed up/attended/logged in/contacted you? Did you reach the audience you intended to reach? Did they like the program? Did they use the ideas? Do they want more information?

The purpose of an evaluation is to measure and thus learn from your successes and mistakes, and to garner future funding. Remember that everything gets better with practice. If one program bombs, then chalk it up as a learning experience.

The best way to justify programming/initiatives is by measuring its worth to the community. This can be done only through an evaluation process.

Evaluations do not have to be complicated. Create a survey. Track website hits, unique visitors, and attendance. Compile the results and make a formal report. Track positive feedback. Track your publicity.

A survey can be as simple as a few "rate this," or yes or no questions on a half piece of paper that is handed out after the program. However, you may want to make the survey in-depth, because while you have the patron's attention, you can poll them about other questions you have that are unrelated to the event, such as future programming ideas or whether they would use the library if it were open on Sundays.

Another method of feedback could be an interactive form for participants to fill out online. You could collect testimonials to use in your next wave of publicity. Remember to use names only with permission. Remind your staff, who is in essence your "sales force," to forward any positive comments they receive to the publicity coordinator.

Remember that if you count the data, you're more likely to learn from it, and you will now have numbers backing up your programming whims; you might even be surprised! Again, watch to see what works and what doesn't. Aim to do it better next time.

Some of these points and others can be found in "10 Tips for Marketing Virtual Reference Services" by Linda Wallace and Peggy Barber ([2002](#)).

One example of a successful marketing and public relation effort is the Amputee Coalition of America's promotions of its monthly e-publications, "Topic of the Month," and PubMed Abstracts. They customize and send out press releases to traditional media outlets, websites, email lists, and individuals. Each initiative has its own goals. "Topic of the Month" was originally designed to help support group leaders with programming ideas. It has evolved into a bibliography service for consumers, health professionals, and librarians. PubMed, on the other hand, is intended for professionals only. It was developed to help keep professionals up-to-date on current research, and this in turn benefits the amputee community. ACA practices branding; they use the same look and feel for all e-publications. They have a consistent message. The goal of the public relations efforts is to introduce people to our e-publications as well as invite them to subscribe to them.

Here is an example of an ACA press release email.

Figure 1: Example of Press Release E-mail.

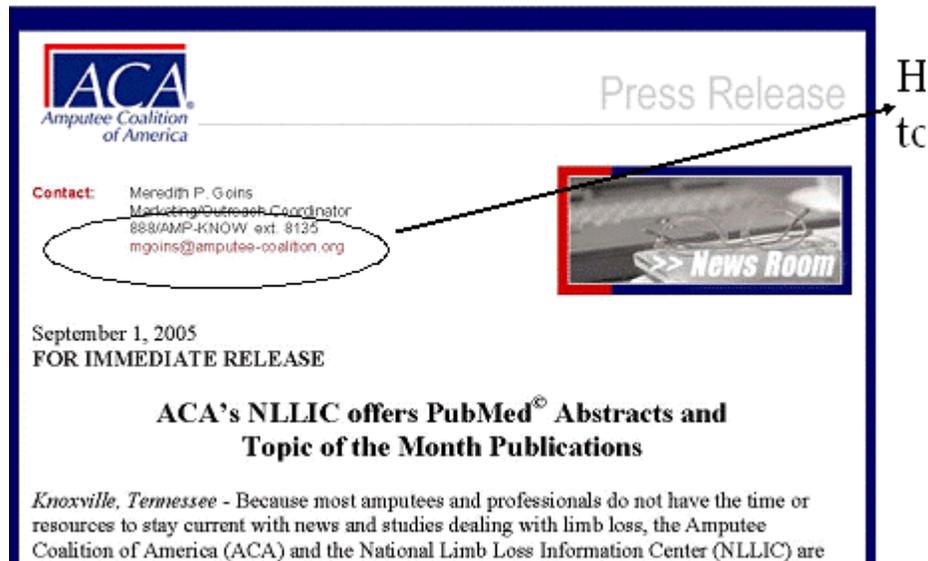
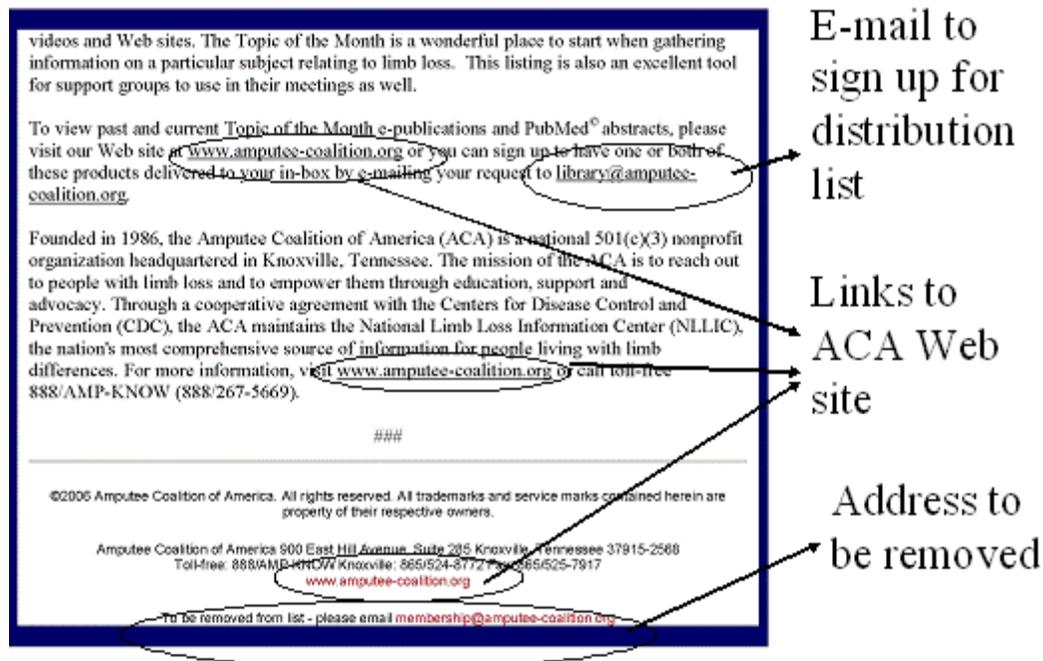


Figure 2. Press Release E-mail details



The keys to successful public relations efforts are to create a strategic plan, write effective press releases, and practice effective marketing techniques. Good luck with your public relations efforts!

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