

## Chapter XXV

### Public Relations

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EVERY ACTIVITY OF THE AGENCY AFFECTS PUBLIC OPINION. The good name which is gained by a social agency from careful and economical purchasing and payment is only part of the high repute which it should attempt to build up through a well-planned public relations program. The publicity-minded organization will study every activity of its employees, every aspect of its appearance, and every phase of its policy with a view to developing good will and understanding. These attitudes in turn will be expressed in the co-operation of citizens, in the use of the agency by those whom it is intended to serve, and in a fuller measure of funds necessary for carrying on its work. There is not space here for a lengthy discussion of public relations (to which an entire book could be devoted and on which many books have been written), nor is there any need for a detailed discussion of the subject in the small space available. A few general principles, however, may be worth suggesting for the administrator who wishes to elaborate them and to apply them in detail.

(a) *Public Relations vs. Publicity.* Of late years a distinction has been drawn between public relations and publicity. Public relations is held to be the total relationship of the agency to the community, and the public relations program is the means by which that relationship is purposefully directed in behalf of the agency. Publicity is the use of various media of communication (such as the press, radio, motion pictures, printed matter, and so forth) by which information regarding the agency is disseminated. The publicity man of a generation ago (we used to be one) has become the director of public relations of today (we now employ one).

(b) *Appearances Count.* A vital principle of public relations is that every aspect of the agency and its work has its part in the attitude of the public toward the agency and hence is a factor in its public relations—in its creation of good will or ill will. In the ap-

pearance of the agency's office, its building and grounds, its automobile, or its workers may lie all the difference between a businesslike and an unbusinesslike impression—between one of economy and one of extravagance, one of simplicity and one of elaborateness, one of efficiency and economy and one of wastefulness. Indeed, the very name of the agency, its statement of purpose, and its democratic or undemocratic method of electing officers as prescribed in the constitution and bylaws may be important factors in public relations. The zealous executive examines every phase of his organization to make sure that it presents such community relationships as will build up the kind of public attitude he desires.

(c) *Attitude of Workers.* More than this, the attitude of the workers themselves is a factor in public opinion. Does the telephone operator have a voice "with a smile"? Is the reception clerk courteous to all, or is she abrupt and curt to those she thinks unimportant? Is the information clerk quick and obliging, or does she give the impression she is trying to save herself as much trouble as possible? Do case workers in their contact with employers, relatives, and neighbors of clients give an impression of courtesy, consideration, sympathy, and understanding which will build good will toward the organization, or are they abrupt and domineering? The attitude of the agency's personnel is likely to affect the attitude of the public.

(d) *Quality of Service.* The quality of the agency's service is a fundamental aspect of public relations. If applicants for service are cared for promptly, adequately, courteously, and considerately, and if prompt reports of the action taken are given to those individuals or organizations by which the clients were referred to the agency, the news will spread quickly. It will be an aid in the agency's efforts to maintain and improve its public relations. On the other hand, the most fervid and ingenious publicity devices in the world cannot succeed in securing support for a social agency that is dilatory, slovenly, unsympathetic, inadequate, and ineffective in its service. It is true of agencies, as of individuals, that "actions speak louder than words."

CONTINUOUS PUBLIC RELATIONS POLICY NECESSARY. Words, too, are necessary. In addition to the favorable public opinion created by the appearance and activity of the agency, it should have a definite public relations policy in which the executive and the board are active factors. Regardless of whether the agency employs a full-time or a part-time director of public relations, the executive himself

must realize that the creation of favorable public opinion is one of his important responsibilities. He must think continually in terms of the interpretation of the work of his agency. He should either handle the publicity himself or work with the director of public relations to see that it is adequately managed.

Furthermore, the agency should have a standing committee on public relations which will give continuous attention to the creation of favorable public opinion and to the development and utilization of the various media through which the public may be reached. The public relations committee should be made up of competent technicians in the fields of publicity and public relations. The chairman should be well qualified for leadership and should be *ex officio* a member of the board and of the executive committee of the agency.

A public relations program should reach not only the membership of the organization but all in the community whose opinion about the agency is important. This includes practically everyone. The agency should impress upon its staff members the importance of a constructive attitude toward public relations and encourage them to submit publicity material or to make suggestions out of their own experience. Organizations with district or branch offices may well have in each of those offices a staff member responsible for submitting publicity material. The whole organization, from the reception clerk to the president, must realize that a vital part of the agency's work is to create public understanding and good will.

**INTERPRETIVE PUBLICITY.** The publicity material which the agency creates through various channels as part of its public relations program must, if it is to be valuable, be interpretive. Too much social work publicity is merely noise—a beating on the bass drum of the public consciousness, saying, as it were, “We are here, we are here.” This is not sufficient. The publicity material must be such as to give the person who reads it a better understanding of the agency's work, the problems it meets, and the ways in which it attacks those problems. The true measure of good publicity is not quantity but quality. The test of its effectiveness is not whether everybody in town knows the name of the organization but whether everybody who knows its name knows also what it does in behalf of community welfare, what are the community problems which the agency attacks, and what are the social and economic reasons for them. Almost anyone can secure publicity about an organization, but it takes a person of understanding, imagination, and ability to secure

interpretive publicity. It is at this kind of publicity that the social agency should aim.

**INEXPENSIVE PUBLICITY.** Publicity material need not be expensive. The executive and the committee which plans it should not spend more money than is necessary to attain a given result effectively. On the other hand, the social agency should not be deterred from a public relations program in the thought that satisfactory results may be too expensive to attain. Public speaking is one of the most effective publicity media. It usually costs nothing beyond the trouble of securing openings for speakers and arranging for them to speak. Ingenuity in securing openings and ability in presenting the agency's message may make public speaking one of the most important phases of agency publicity. Radio publicity, too, may also be secured by the use of brains rather than money.

Newspaper publicity should not be expensive. Although it is an advantage for the social agency to have a good director of public relations who can write stories in newspaper style, the news itself is more important than the way in which it is presented. If the agency has no public relations expert available, it can still get newspaper publicity if it really is doing worth-while work, by informing the city editors of its activities so that reporters themselves may prepare the material.

Again, no large sum of money is necessary for direct-mail advertising. An important message, even if it is on wrapping paper and mailed in an inexpensive envelope or on a postal card, may if interestingly written be more widely read and do more good than a less important message stated less vividly but prepared in the most elaborate and expensive way. There again, brains and taste are more important than a heavy expenditure of funds.

**AIM YOUR PUBLICITY AT A GROUP.** The important factors in publicity for a social agency are to study carefully the kinds of groups to be reached, to analyze their interests, and to reach them in the least expensive way with a message which is appropriate to them. Much publicity material, unhappily, is like the shotgun or "scatter" gun, aimed only at a general objective. To be effective, publicity should be aimed at a specific object, and the rifle used should be of a caliber just sufficient to produce the desired result. It would be foolish to shoot a rabbit with an elephant gun, because there would be very little rabbit left after the bullet hit him. It would be equally foolish to try to kill an elephant with a rifle only large enough to kill a rabbit. In the same way, the director of public relations must

choose his weapons and his ammunition in terms of the interpretive goals to be reached. An elaborate and beautiful booklet may seem entirely appropriate to the wealthy citizen and may bring from him money and good will for the agency. If sent to people of modest means, that same booklet might appear extravagant and might therefore drive away far more support than it won. Case work on the elements of the agency's constituency is just as important in treating the problem of public relations as it is in treating clients of the agency.

Here are the morals of this very brief chapter: The agency's actions and appearance speak louder than the words of the director of public relations. A strong public relations program is an important and fundamental part of the work of the social agency. For that program the staff, the executive, and the board of directors must be responsible through appropriate subdivision of responsibility. Publicity material need not be expensive. The mode of expression and transmission of the publicity material must be adapted, through long-time planning and persistent action, to the individuals who make up the groups who should be reached by it. All that the agency and its personnel, both lay and professional, do and say and are, officially and unofficially, are factors in the public relations of the agency. The public relations program utilizing these factors should be well conceived, thoughtfully executed, and continually adapted to the changing currents of community needs and attitudes. Public relations are dynamic, not static. They should be related to the environment. In turn, they continually affect that environment.

This is the gist of public relations. All that might be said further would be merely an elaboration of details based on these fundamental principles.

#### QUESTIONS

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1. What sort of impression is made upon the public by the appearance of the building, equipment, and workers of a social agency you know?
2. What impression is given by the attitude of the workers toward the members of the public with whom they come in contact?
3. What reputation is created for the agency by the quality of its service?
4. Does this agency have a public relations policy? If so, what is it?
5. To what extent, and how, is this policy carried out through the organization?

6. Is its publicity interpretive?
7. How expensive is it?
8. To what extent is it aimed at particular groups?
9. How could these public relations policies and practices be improved?