PUBLIC RELATIONS AND MARKETING IN
PERPUSTAKAAN NEGARA MALAYSIA*

by

MARIAM ABDUL KADIR** & SITI AISHAH***

ABSTRAK

Program perhubungan awam dan strategi pemasaran yang baik adalah penting bagi sebuah perpustakaan untuk mempromosikan perkhidmatannya. Artikel ini membicarakan tentang pengalaman Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia dalam melaksanakan program perhubungan awannya sendiri dan langkah-langkah positif yang diambil untuk mendapat sokongan dari pihak atasan Kerajaan.

INTRODUCTION

Every service-oriented organisation will need to apply good Public Relations (PR) and marketing strategies to promote or sell their services. Libraries cannot afford to be unconcerned about their PR since a low profile and poor publicity can mean the lost of support for its development. There is a temptation for national libraries to be complacent as the country’s biggest and most powerful library and the misconception that it will always be in the forefront. Even where national libraries have extended their activities and services with success, they still have to compete for quality of service and cost. This is especially so in developing countries where the national library will have to compete with university libraries and state libraries which are already well established.

NEED AND ESTABLISHMENT OF A
PUBLIC RELATIONS DIVISION.

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia had many setbacks when it was first established in 1972. It had to emerge from the shadows of the National Archives of which it was formerly a division and the fact that for the first twenty years it was without its own building and was housed in several nondescript rented premises in different parts of the city. Limited facilities and space within these rented premises was an additional limitation. There was little publicity of its services and collections. It was not surprising then that most Malaysians did not even know of its existance and whereabout. The older established University of Malaya library with better collection has a higher profile then. However, things changed when in 1992 Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia finally moved into its own building at Jalan Tun Razak which quickly became one of the Kuala Lumpur’s landmark. We then launched into a new phase of image building and to stamp our mark as the ultimate resource and reference centre of Malaysia. With such high expectations from the public, the need to establish a PR Division became more apparent which was established in 1992 itself. This was preferred to using a PR firm for our publicity and image building which is not cost-beneficial and the fact that PR firms tend to go

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** Director - General, Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia
*** Librarian / Public Relations Officer, Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia
overboard in their publicity campaign.

We also had to decide whether a librarian without PR qualification or a PR trained officer without any library knowledge would be the best choice to lead the PR Division. We finally decided that our own library officer with more than 10 years experience in various divisions and a keen interest in PR work will be a better choice. With the right attitude, excellent public relations temperament and short courses in PR, she has managed to plan and implement a successful PR strategy. She currently manages the Division with only 3 supporting staff i.e. a graphic artist and two library attendents.

BUDGET ALLOCATION

The PR Division of Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, being an integral part of the library’s operation, is allocated with adequate funds from the library’s annual operating budget. Public relations programmes require specific and realistic objectives and adequate funding for its promotional publications, exhibitions, corporate videos and various lunches for visitors. Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia is fortunate that the decision-makers in the relevant central agencies recognise and support the need for good PR in government departments serving the public.

PUBLICITY, PROMOTION AND MARKETING ACTIVITIES

A high profile for our library does not just happen. It is a planned, continuous and sustained effort which in the end will win understanding and support from library users. We have since 1992 been able to maintain the credibility and reputation we have built, and today we are able to effectively communicate with various sectors of the public. This have been achieved through the following activities :-

1. Media Relations

From the onset, our main efforts was to obtain a favourable support from the local mass media. Press releases, press conferences and interviews are continuously carried out, with a target of at least one big publicity effort a month. The public is now more aware of our existence, services and activities. The most important aspect of dealing effectively with the media is understanding their demands and always providing correct facts and figures. A common error in dealing with the media is telling them what we want covered, and how we want it done. Unfortunately, reporters and editors seldom oblige us when we tend to be too pushy. Since they have the final say, we have found it works better when we are able to provide them front page news like having a popular minister or public figure to officiate our functions.

Another strategy that have always earned us space in the national and local news page is appointing the group editor of the New Straits Times, a major local newspaper, as a member of the National Library Advisory Board. The local T.V. Stations have also been giving us good coverage, with frequent appearances during prime time news.

2. Promotional Publications

Promotional publications is an effective marketing tool because it can convey a specific message to specific groups according to their requirements. While the print media can promote our services, we have learned not to rely on this alone since we are never sure whether it will be well reported or printed. With our own print publicity we have total control of our own stories. The Public Relations Division of Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia produces newsletters, an annual journal, brochures, leaflets, flyers and souvenir programmes for special events.

3. Library Visits and Tours

The new NLM building has become one of
the city’s local tourist attractions. An average of 80 - 100 groups (8000 persons) from local schools, institutions of higher learning, government and private sectors and associations visit the library each year. A corporate video presentation and guided tours are normally conducted for them.

Since last year, we have invited senior officials from government departments, decision-makers and politicians to visit the library. Response have been good and now foreign Ambassadors and High Commissioners have invited themselves, usually with an entourage and a book presentation ceremony. Such organised visits have made a strong impression on the V.I.Ps so much so that recently when the Hon.Deputy Prime Minister agreed to launch a new scholarly magazine, he insisted that the organiser shift the venue from a 5-Star hotel to our library’s auditorium.

4. Exhibitions

Exhibitions are deemed an appropriate public relations activity for the National Library mainly to create awareness of our collection and services. A planned exhibition programme is made throughout each year, mostly jointly organised with other institutions or government agencies. A successful exhibition that we mounted in 1993 and drew a lot of publicity was “Books from Down Under” organised with the Australian High Commission in Malaysia.

5. Friends of the National Library

Friends of the National Library Club was formally organised last year and to date, it has 370 registered members comprising professionals, civil servants, youth, pensioners, researchers, corporate group and students above 17 years. The objectives are 1) to attract and nurture interest of members of the public who wish to assist voluntarily in the library’s various activities and 2) to encourage those who wish to promote the activities of the library by contributing their ideas, skills, expertise and creativity. Membership is free and they volunteer during their free time to assist us. This is very helpful since we are at the moment faced with shortage of non-professional staff.

Organised activities for the Friends of National Library Club have proven to be valuable and positive image building. It should be noted also that 70% of the Club members are within the 17-25 years age group who will be the faithful future users of the library. The Friends of the NL Club are structurally divided into 6 bureaus i.e. visits and library activities bureau, reading promotion bureau, the publications, exhibitions, computer and audio visual bureau. The young members of the club have been able to bring in more young people into the library.

CONCLUSION

What I have outlined is nothing new and have been carried out successfully also by other national libraries. But what I feel is important is that within a short time of 3 years, since late 1992, we have managed to make up for the earlier years of a quiet and almost unknown existence. Being a new kid on the block at this game, we have learned from others, eg in setting up Friends of the NL Club, we implemented it to suit our needs.

It is important that national libraries especially from developing countries, have a good PR and Marketing programme to get the support of decision-makers. In fact this is one of the resolutions of CDNLAO 5 held in Kuala Lumpur in 1992.