

Desperate Times Call for Practical Measures

Tap into the one billion Web users with more PR online

by Phill W. Johnson

Did you hear about the public library director in Texas who camped out on the roof of her library in an effort to raise money? Sorry, no punch line in this one, folks. It actually happened. Rose Aleta Laurell, then-director of Texas' oldest continually operating library, needed \$20,000 in additional funding for her facility. Her solution: have a construction crane hoist her to a perch high above the usual confines of the reference desk.

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Temple University Law Library's new blog promotes the library as the gateway to legal information at its institution.

According to an article in the *Austin Chronicle*, the so-called loony librarian “presented herself to the public in a most alarming fluorescent-pink jump suit, more jewelry than Mr. T, and a golden construction hat.” How much attention did this PR activity draw? The article in the *Chronicle* generated public interest in the plight of the library, and Laurell received one of eight John Cotton Dana Library Public Relations Awards for 2001.

Do you really have to resort to such extreme measures to draw attention to your library? Certainly not. There are much easier and safer ways to promote ourselves. According to the *Computer Industry Almanac*, a group that publishes market research reports for the PC, Internet, and wireless industry, there will be approximately one billion users online in 2005. Law librarians should use their online presence to tap into those users, especially considering that for many of us our initial interaction with users is not in person but via our online presence. Why not use that portal to begin the PR process?

Update Your Web Site

As the world continually changes the way it accesses information, law librarians, too, should reconsider their approach to marketing their libraries. With many users rarely entering our doors—instead using our Web sites as a “branch” of our libraries—we may need to push more of our PR tools to our Web site. A library already has to consider the requirements, preferences, and decision-making processes of our users when thinking about PR strategies. We could easily use those same principles in a Web-based environment.

Consider the fact that we have sole discretion of what content to include on our Web sites. We also have the ability to frequently change that content to suit ever-changing needs. A well-designed site, such as one using cascading style sheets, can be changed in a matter of minutes. Not just one page, but every page on the entire site. Of course, there is rarely a need to change every single page if the site is wisely constructed. But if the need arises, we

have the ability to completely and quickly redesign a site, which means that we can push the PR envelope to our maximum benefit.

For instance, a newsletter is a great tool for disseminating information, but are you reaching your entire audience? One way to increase distribution is to have both a print newsletter and an e-zine. What is an e-zine? Think of your print newsletter published electronically but available to a much wider audience. *Bravenet News* offers the following tips for making an e-zine work for you:

- Include a link or form within the navigation menu of your site.
- Include a link to your e-zine with *all* outgoing e-mail.
- Post articles about your e-zine, with a link back to your site.
- Encourage readers to forward or recommend your e-zine.
- Make the newsletter useful or unique.
- Comply with anti-spam regulations.

Another consideration when using your site for PR purposes is time. On average, users typically leave a site if they have not found what they are looking for within 10 seconds, which means navigation is critical and leaves little room for large amounts of PR material. Focus on what is most important to you, and place that information in a strategic location. You will not reach every user, but you can increase your odds by drawing the user farther into your site. In fact, you can increase your PR presence on sub-pages since you have drawn the user in at that point. And if your splash page absolutely requires scrolling, keep the most important information above the fold, that is, where it can be seen without first scrolling.

Another way to add PR dynamism to your Web site is to consider the fact that you can promote *anything* you want. Have a new rare book? By all means, put that information on your splash page. Increasing the number of reference hours you offer

each week? Let everyone know right up front, couching the link in terms that makes the user want to know more. No matter how big or small the information

you are promoting, you have the ability to make it what you want it to be. Even if you are a small library staying open an extra hour each day, make the PR announcement speak volumes about your new service. Just remember not to overload your site by pushing all of your PR promotion to one place. While your Web site is a great PR tool, one needs a balanced approach, and this is just one weapon in your PR arsenal.

Join the Blog Trend

Blogs are another great way to enhance your PR presence. An excellent example is the Trial Advocacy Blog recently started by the Temple University Law Library (<http://indexhtml.blogspot.com>). According to its Web site, the blog was created as “a forum to provide information and discussion on trial advocacy.” However, it does much more than that.

This beautifully designed site also promotes the library as the gateway to legal information at its institution. Additionally, it is a great PR tool that shows how proactive the library is within the Temple Law School. And just because this example is from an academic institution does not preclude smaller law libraries from having blogs. As long as the information is timely and directly related to user needs, a blog can be used for the informational and PR needs of any library, no matter what the size.

With an expected one billion users online in 2005, we should all make good use of our online presence. Newsletters in the form of e-zines, blogs, and our Web sites can be used to increase our PR activity while providing useful services to our users. And the best part is that we do not have to expend large amounts of money or time to promote our institutions ... and we don't have to camp out on the roof of the library. ■

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