

# Use of Public Relations and Publicity (PRP) by the public libraries in Lahore, Pakistan

Kanwal Ameen

*Department of Information Management, University of the Punjab,  
Lahore, Pakistan*

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455

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore the use of public relations and publicity (PRP) by the public libraries. It also intends to create awareness among the information professionals regarding the use of PRP.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The qualitative design, based on the interview method as data collection technique, was used to get the opinions and perceptions of the selected public librarians. The content analysis of the responses was made to answer the research questions.

**Findings** – The findings revealed that PRP are hardly used by the public libraries in Lahore.

**Research limitations/implications** – It will serve as a guideline for further research in quantitative and qualitative manner, as it has addressed an untouched area.

**Practical implications** – It is likely that it will raise awareness among the public librarians regarding the use of PRP for creating and maintaining a strong positive image.

**Originality/value** – It will serve as a guideline for further research in quantitative and qualitative manner, as it has addressed an untouched area and reports original research.

**Keywords** Publicity, Public relations, Marketing of information and library services, Public library

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Creating and delivering customer-focused, innovative and value-added services is essential to marketing philosophy, planning and process. To survive in a competitive environment, it is imperative for every organization to follow modern marketing philosophy and process for building customer loyalty. The heart of marketing philosophy is “customer”. Before moving forward, it seems appropriate to define here the concepts of marketing, promotion, advertising and public relations, as these are at times used interchangeably. According to marketing guru [Kotler and Armstrong \(2012, p. 30\)](#), “Marketing is a *process* by which companies create value for customers and build strong customer relationships in order to capture value from customers in return”. Promotion is the last segment in a set of 4Ps also called “marketing mix” and “marketing tools” consisted of product, price, place and promotion. 4Ps are used to turn marketing philosophy into a marketing management process for creating an offering that meets customers’ needs and wants. The aim of a promotion is to “communicate” the value of an organization and its offerings to its customer, whereas public relations, publicity and advertisement are promotion methods used by an organization. They are tools for communicating organizations’ service philosophy and practices to the target clients for



their awareness and creating a positive image. Their impact is so overwhelming that people commonly perceive them as the whole of marketing.

*A brief overview of public relations and publicity in information and library services*

The literature on marketing of information and library services strongly argues the use of its philosophy, process and tools by all kinds of information and library organizations. Similarly, the use of public relations and publicity (PRP) is considered essential for libraries in the present era of information revolution. It helps them in getting the required resources, creating goodwill among the stakeholders and optimizing the use of their resources and services.

In the context of library and information organization, Weingand (1998, p. 134) defined public relations as, “overall relationship between the library and its current and potential customers. PR reflects the mutual perceptions and attitudes held by both library staff and library customers”. Weingand defined publicity as “the news coverage of the library’s affairs secured at little or no cost”. Rowley (2006, p. 122) stated PRP as “programs and initiatives designed to promote and/or protect an information organization’s image or that of its products in professional or in-house newsletters”. Regarding the functions of PRP, Rowley mentioned, “promotion of image as well as protection of image from any negative perception about the organization”. De Saez and Belčkaj (2002, p. 80) argued that the poor image of libraries is largely in the minds of the librarians and professionals themselves; the larger publics tend to be, on the whole, completely indifferent. Changing that indifference to positive approbation is the work of public relation. Wilson and Gilligan with Howdsen maintained that from an organizational perspective, public relations is simply, the art of managing relations with its publics (as cited by De Saez and Belčkaj, 2002, p. 80). Marshall (2001, p. 116) asserted as follows:

The concept of effective public relations as an essential component of a well-managed library is not new. As early as 1958, the importance of public relations was discussed in the professional journals of the field. Since early 1970s, most public libraries have implemented at least some public relations strategies to interact better with their many constituencies including patrons, community members, and governing bodies.

Public libraries have various goals related to serving their diverse communities by offering a variety of services. UNESCO Public Library Manifesto states, “The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups”. They have a fundamental role in developing a real democratic nation. Hence, the importance of PRP becomes obvious for public libraries. PRP are already being used by vibrant public libraries as part of marketing strategy to reach the community and to build a positive image. On the other hand, Shontz *et al.* (2004, p. 63) reported:

Many people do not take full advantage of all the services available in public libraries. Large-scale library usage studies conducted in the 1990s suggested that 34 per cent of Americans and 24 per cent of UK residents do not use public libraries at all. One reason for this may be that libraries do not market themselves effectively. Many librarians may lack knowledge about marketing, and may not consider it important, or may actually have negative attitudes about marketing.

The 2005 OCLC study of the library users' perceptions (De Rosa *et al.*, 2005), and other surveys revealed that:

[...] a majority of people using search engines in preference to library resources has been a cause of some alarm among librarians who see libraries in danger of losing their place as the primary information provider to academics and the general public (Fialkoff, 2006).

The author attributed part of the problem to libraries being failures in marketing. She seems correct to a certain extent. "Libraries do need to look at how they communicate with their audience, especially now that their audience is being attracted to other services". Mi and Nesta (2006) elaborated this notion as follows:

[...] librarians and digital resources can play a critical role in today's students' life-long learning. Marketing is the key to success of the library and listening to customers is the key to marketing [...]. To compete, libraries have to bring down their costs, making library use as efficient as possible. It is also the responsibility of librarians to support the Net Generation's life-long learning process.

Nevertheless, a review of the recent literature and Web sites of public libraries in the developed world demonstrates a significant use of PRP. According to the latest report released on January 22, 2013, by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, public libraries served 96.4 per cent of the total US population in 2010 (ALA, 2014). The John Cotton Dana Award provided in conjunction with the H.W. Wilson Foundation, the American Library Association and EBSCO honors outstanding library public relations. The winners' list shows that these awards have been won largely by the public libraries ([www.ebscohost.com/academic/john-cotton-dana](http://www.ebscohost.com/academic/john-cotton-dana)).

Considering the importance of PRP in public libraries, it seemed important to investigate the situation of PRP in the local scenario while taking the city of Lahore as a case. Pakistan has a system of public libraries, run by the provincial governments, but their directory and exact number is not available. A recent survey of public libraries in the Punjab Province reveals a dismal state of these libraries, particularly those in small cities and towns (Warriach, 2013). Lahore, a historical place and the cultural hub of the country, is the capital of Punjab and the second largest city of Pakistan, with a population of approximately 10 million. It has seven public libraries, four run by the provincial government, two by the newly built housing societies and one by a trust. All these libraries have approximately 45,000 citizens as members (personal communication, Mohammad Taufiq, Deputy Director in the Directorate of Public Libraries, Punjab). No current research on the use of public libraries in Pakistan was available to this researcher. Nevertheless, there is a common perception that libraries are not used widely, and it is assumed that one of the reasons for this might be the lack of awareness about the services being offered.

#### *Aims of the study*

The study aimed to explore the public librarians' perception of PRP as well as its use in the public libraries of Lahore. It was assumed that it would bring into light the present status in this regard while creating awareness among information professionals. Also, it aimed to give guidelines for the use of effective strategies in the local environment in light of the literature reviewed.

*Research questions*

The study addressed the following research questions to meet its aims:

- RQ1.* What is the perception of the chief librarians regarding PRP?
- RQ2.* What types of PRP activities are currently in practice by the public libraries and which ones are not?
- RQ3.* What are the barriers in using these practices?
- RQ4.* What kind of PRP strategies can Pakistani libraries use?

**Review of the literature**

The roles and functions of PRP devised by organizations outside library and information services (LIS) domain also provide a better understanding of the subject. For example, according to UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR):

Public Relations is about reputation - the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public Relations is the discipline that looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behavior. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics.

CIPR further emphasizes the need of PRP as follows:

Every organization, no matter how large or small, ultimately depends on its reputation for survival and success. Customers, suppliers, employees, investors, journalists and regulators can have a powerful impact. They all have an opinion about the organizations they come into contact with – whether good or bad, right or wrong. These perceptions will drive their decisions about whether they want to work with, shop with and support these organizations. In today's competitive market, reputation can be a company's biggest asset – the thing that makes you stand out from the crowd and gives you a competitive edge. Effective PR can help manage reputation by communicating and building good relationships with all organization stakeholders.

Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defined, "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics". Simple and straightforward, this definition focuses on the basic concept of public relations – as a communication process, one that is strategic in nature and emphasizing "mutually beneficial relationships". The official statement of PRSA elaborates public relations as management functions as well.

A review of the available literature shows that various types of studies have been conducted to date to explore librarian's perception about marketing and its application in libraries. Gupta (2007) presented an overview of the literature on LIS marketing from 1970 to 2005. By using different databases, bibliographies, reviews, books and journal articles, the author came up with the findings that the growth of LIS marketing literature has been significant over the years. Rowley (2003) articulated that a majority of the literature on the marketing of libraries and information services is either in the form of "how to" guides or case studies of practice in specific contexts. A few studies investigated the attitudes of librarians toward marketing. Thus, a major part of the literature discusses the application of marketing in libraries. The following section reviews the very few studies retrieved on use of public relations in libraries along with studies on marketing of LIS as a whole.

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Marshall (2001) reported the results of interviews with 13 library directors on the subject of public relations. He found that while most grasped the value of maintaining a strong public image, many have not actively tracked any organized public relations program. Berger (1979) conducted research to determine whether libraries could gain higher budget allocation if they employed public relations activities. The following hypothesis was formulated: "Libraries that engage in public relations activities will show higher public support by a higher budget allocation than libraries who do not engage in public relations activities". A questionnaire of 26 items was sent to Connecticut libraries serving a population of more than 25,000. The hypothesis was supported by the findings.

Reader and Rani (2007) studied the user's attitude toward marketing of information products and services in selected university libraries. Findings revealed that users needed up-to-date information, but they were not satisfied with the information products and services available. Results showed that users were even willing to pay fee for the required information products and services. Mu (2007) argued that Asian students are less knowledgeable in using library resources and information services, and there is a need to market library services/products to Asian students. Saravanan (2010) concluded that a majority of public library users had a positive opinion about the marketing of information services. A large number of users wanted a library week to be organized. Broaduy-Preston and Steel (2002) reported a survey of six public library authorities in London in 2001 for exploring employee satisfaction and customer orientation. It forms part of a larger investigation into the evolution of internal marketing within these organizations. Mi and Nesta (2006) examined the role of marketing to new generations of library users. They found that libraries could attract and better serve new generations of users by applying classic marketing ethos. Although libraries no longer have a monopoly on information sources and services, they do offer value-added services.

Kaur and Rani (2008) conducted a study to assess the attitude of library professionals toward marketing of information services and products. Taking university libraries as a sample, they found that even though the librarians had a positive attitude toward marketing services, they were not practicing this approach because of a lack of knowledge about marketing. Kanaujia (2004) reported similar findings on librarians' positive attitude toward the different aspects of marketing of a library's information services. Respondents agreed that the lack of marketing was due to a lack of knowledge. Findings revealed that librarians were using promotional activities in a non-systematic and unplanned manner. Kim and Park (2006) conducted a survey to measure the application of 7Ps (product, price, place, promotion, participants, physical evidence and process) by Korean libraries to analysis reference and information services. The authors reported that the Homepage was the most popular tool for promotion of the reference and information services in Korean libraries.

Another study focused on librarians and identified attitudes of public librarians regarding the marketing of library services and related these attitudes to selected independent variables. The study results indicated mostly positive attitudes of the respondents toward library marketing along with some statistically significant differences between subgroups. For example, more positive attitudes toward marketing were expressed by the library administrators, librarians who had taken a course or workshop in marketing, and those who perceived marketing to be a high priority in their

libraries (Shontz *et al.*, 2004). Aharony (2009) reported a positive correlation between personal characteristics: “empowerment, extroversion and resistance to change” and attitudes toward marketing libraries. The outcomes of the study emphasized on the idea that librarians of all kinds should have exposure to marketing concepts to maintain their focal position as information providers, despite the new technologically advanced world.

Cosette (1987) discussed marketing and public relations and their fundamental factors. Gould (2009) emphasized that a fast-paced and complex public relations role is becoming increasingly important, as libraries need to respond quickly to the changing media landscape.

#### *Local literature*

The first significant writing in Pakistan on marketing was by Ameen (2011). She reviewed the status of marketing in LIS education in Pakistan and reported that the subject of LIS marketing was not included in the curriculum of library schools in Pakistan as a compulsory or even as an optional subject. She argued that practical implication of marketing approach in libraries was still unfamiliar for working professionals. Another study by Ameen and Warraich (2007) revealed student’s perspective about the concept and need of marketing in library and information centers in Pakistan. They observed that perception about marketing was limited to selling and advertising; hence, there was a dire need to clarify the concept of what is marketing? It was also concluded that workshops and seminars be conducted on marketing for the students and working professionals to enable them to practice marketing strategies effectively in libraries.

Ahmad and Rehman (2007) indicated that along with other challenges, Pakistani libraries are facing the challenge of marketing in a competitive environment in terms of Internet availability, decreased number of clients and increased pressure to secure funding, etc. They argued that at present, marketing of LIS in Pakistan is within its initial stage, and a full course of LIS marketing was being taught only at three universities. They focused on recognition of marketing concepts and techniques for the survival, quality and growth of library services.

Ameen (2011, p. 175) emphasized that “with the challenge ahead the professionals must focus to enhance the visibility of their services among the community”. Tufail (2009) conducted a master-level study on promotional activities (one “P” of the marketing mix) in the university libraries of Lahore. This study of librarian’s attitude about using promotional activities found that, although respondents believed in using promotional activities, they largely depend on personal communication as a promotional technique. They considered a lack of budget as the main hindrance in using promotional techniques.

The review of literature established that a majority of the available literature addresses what, how and why of marketing in LIS. However, the research studies focus on a single library or a group of libraries on a single geographical area. The awareness regarding the need to apply marketing in libraries has grown to a great extent. Studies are also being conducted to assess its applications. Findings of the studies on LIS marketing revealed that Pakistani librarians favor application of LIS marketing, but in practice, they are not formally applying it. The present study is the first of its nature, focusing on PRP, and is an effort to fill some gap in local literature.

## Research method

Because of the absence of any previous local research on this topic, the study aimed to explore the phenomenon based on the qualitative design using interview technique to collect the data for addressing the research questions. A review of the literature on the subject helped in formulating the research questions and setting the background of the study. Only the libraries run by the LIS professionals were chosen for the study (i.e.  $N = 4$ ). To keep anonymity of the libraries and their heads, the details are not given. Of the four chief librarians, three were available for the interview. The interviews were audio-recorded, while notes were also taken to aid the technique. The duration of the interviews was between 30-45 minutes. The author analyzed the content to answer the research questions. As the analysis is based on only three interviews, the quantitative presentation of the opinions has not been made. The interviewees' opinions and perceptions were quite similar about the PRP. Moreover, these libraries have more or less the same administrative issues since the Directorate of Public Libraries, government of the Punjab, runs them. Thus, the analysis is presented in a descriptive manner, illustrating their opinions and status on PRP. The limitation of the study is that the findings show the status of PRP merely in the said libraries and cannot be generalized. Yet, it is significant as a base-line study and may serve as a reference for further investigations.

## Findings and discussion

The following section presents findings related to the research questions and discussion:

*RQ1.* What is the perception of chief librarians regarding PRP?

- *Dealing with visitors in a desired manner.* In respondents' opinion, "dealing with the visitors in the best possible manner means good use of public relations". "We should develop a bond with clients through good services". A respondent mentioned, "The visits and use of the library by senior or retired bureaucrats indicate good public relations". It is interesting to mention that the elite visiting these public libraries expect special dealing, protocol and attention by the staff. Another statement was, "To welcome clients and deal in a good way is publicity".

Overall, PRP was perceived as dealing in an active, personal manner with visitors in the library. It establishes that the professionals were not clear about the concept and role of PRP in academic terms and also not familiar with using it effectively for image building and promoting the services among the community.

*RQ2.* What kinds of PRP activities are practiced or not practiced by the public libraries?

The following is the status of PRP activities in the responding libraries:

- *Organizing events:* The analysis revealed that the conducting seminars, lectures, literary events, book exhibitions and the news coverage of such events in the media, publishing bulletin for members and making new members are considered PRP and are being used.
- *Public dealings:* Dealing with library visitors in a desired way is also a kind of PRP in their opinion. "Publicity means that when visitors come, they must be dealt in the best possible way". This practice again varies from library to library. It

depends on an individual librarian's behavior and cannot be considered as a planned PRP policy of a library.

- *E-marketing strategies*: These are not used to promote library and its services. The Web sites either do not exist or are not active and updated and, in some cases, are still under construction. Web 2 technologies are also not being used to connect with the clients. One library has a database of newspaper clippings that is heavily used. None of the libraries provide outreach services.

It shows that the planned PRP efforts hardly exist in the libraries.

*RQ3.* What are the barriers in using PRP in public libraries?

- *Lack of PRP education and training*: Lack of PRP education and training is one of the reasons for not using it in a strategic manner. The interviewees, alumni of the University of the Punjab (PU), did not study marketing of library services during their master's studies because this course was offered in 2001 at PU. Furthermore, no extensive workshops as continuing professional development activity have ever been offered by a professional association or group in Pakistan. The Department of Information Management, PU, and a couple of professional groups each had organized only a basic level of workshop for the working professionals. The respondents admitted, "We are scared of making errors and don't learn new thing". "Library staff needs extensive training and there is no planning for it".
- *Lack of time*: It was also mentioned that a lot of their time is spent on writing minutes, reports of various meetings held by the higher bodies related to various library matters, although they are not the secretaries of those bodies. Two respondents said that their extensive involvement in the secretarial work makes it very hard to pay attention to their professional work and make any plans for new services. One of the respondents said:

We have to do many irrelevant tasks assigned by the higher authorities such as attending committee meetings (I am not a member of those committees) and then writing their minutes takes up a lot of my time.

These libraries are under hierarchical structure of the Punjab Government and even chief librarians have very limited autonomy.

*RQ4.* What kind of PRP strategies can Pakistani libraries use?

As the respondents were not clear about the role and ways of PRP, this question did not obtain any significant or relevant idea. The author asked respondents their opinion on using electronic and digital media, especially the FM radio, as it can be a power tool in PRP. Nevertheless, they agreed with the potential benefits of these mediums and considered using these in the future.

### **Suggestions**

Keeping in view the literature reviewed and the discussion with interviewees on PRP, the following suggestions are furnished to facilitate an understanding regarding the use of PRP in the public libraries of Pakistan, in particular, and libraries of other developing countries, in general.

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- First of all, learning what, why and how of PRP is fundamentally important for senior and middle management public librarians to be able to execute these strategies. The LIS schools and professional associations should offer regular and continuous education plans for PRP strategies.
  - Convincing PRP policies and plans should be made to get approval from the higher authorities.
  - Librarians need to explore alternate funding from local and international bodies while asserting the need for some financial independence by the higher authorities to execute PRP plans.
  - Internet access is available in the public libraries. It offers endless opportunities for connecting with clients and, hence, creating a positive image of the Public libraries.
  - The use of library Web sites and social media is rapidly growing for PRP. The Government of the Punjab is very interested in escalating the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in all sectors; therefore, authorities will most likely support viable ICT-based PRP projects.
  - The Public librarians of Lahore should, first, develop/update their Web sites. Second, the use of social media, Web 2.0, must be made for real-time communication with the clients. Libraries' presence in the virtual world is necessary to stay in touch with young clients who stay connected to the virtual world on their cell phones. They make a large segment of the population of Pakistan. *De Saez and Belčakaj (2002, pp. 154-155)* throw light on the use of "E-public relations". *Hlavinka and Sullivan (2011)* argued that the proliferation of social media use among customers provides library and information organization managers an opportunity to shift their relationships with their customers from dialogue to "trilogue" – in which customer engage in meaningful relationships with one another and with the organization (as cited by *Singh, p. 367*). *Dowd et al. (2010)* provides simple and effective guide for using Web 2.0 as new promotion tools such as blogs, Twitter, Wikis and LinkedIn to mention a few.
  - The public libraries have their members from all walks of life. Public relations must be developed with the influential clients by providing targeted, specific information services. It helps in bringing support for these libraries from various quarters. It should also be used for the publicity of the services in print and electronic media.
  - There should also be active use of electronic and print media. Pakistan has tens of national television channels, city channels, a number of FM Radio channels and newspapers. A planned public relations strategy should be made to use them for coverage of various events, services, special collections and so forth.
  - Last, but not the least, the induction and development of the required human resources is crucial for the successful initiation of PRP in public libraries. The chief librarian has a fundamental role in justifying the need for human and financial resources for PRP to enhance the customers' awareness and to increase communication flow among all stakeholders.

## Conclusion

It is evident that the public libraries in Lahore are generally following traditional style of services and their promotion. Public library professionals need to learn the know-how of devising effective PRP strategies. It is imperative to reach out to the community due to the competitive information environment. The use of PRP for image building is important. Highlighting the available services appears extremely crucial in the local scenario. It will strengthen public libraries' role and position among all stakeholders as well as generally in society.

Although the limitations of having explored only three libraries are recognized, it is likely that it will raise awareness among the public librarians regarding the use of PRP for creating and maintaining a strong positive image. It will also serve as a guideline for further research in quantitative and qualitative manner, as it has addressed an untouched area.

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**Corresponding author**

Kanwal Ameen can be contacted at: [kanwal.im@pu.edu.pk](mailto:kanwal.im@pu.edu.pk)

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