

# REACH OUT IN A NEW DIRECTION: APPLYING PUBLIC RELATIONS BEST PRACTICES TO ACADEMIC OUTREACH

**Bettina Peacemaker**, [bjpeacemaker@vcu.edu](mailto:bjpeacemaker@vcu.edu) | **Sue Robinson**, [srobinson26@vcu.edu](mailto:srobinson26@vcu.edu) | **Marilyn Scott**, [mjscott@vcu.edu](mailto:mjscott@vcu.edu)

Public relations isn't just for Fortune 500 companies or high-profile celebrities. The Public Relations Society of America defines public relations as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics." Thinking about outreach in these expansive terms goes beyond simple promotional activities, media relations, or marketing tactics, and the message should resonate with librarians. Building "mutually beneficial relationships" is at the very core of public services, and serving multiple publics should also be a familiar concept as libraries strive to reach a multitude of audiences.

VCU Libraries, essential to student success and a high-quality student experience, serves many communities of users. In classroom settings and consultations, librarians do an excellent job of communicating to specific audiences, and individual outreach efforts reach targeted groups. But, we lacked a strong, authoritative, unified voice for broad outreach about public services. In the absence of clear or consistent messaging, different librarians produced their own materials. Limited library-wide materials were dated and, in some cases, too expensive given the scale of our efforts.

Trying a new approach, the Director of Communication and Public Relations and public services librarians collaborated to create an integrated campaign focused on understanding VCU's diverse audiences and how to reach them using a consistent message with appealing imagery and concise writing. These efforts culminated in a scalable and sustainable approach for all our publics--from the masses that walk into the building to academic departments--even individual students.

**View the poster** [http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/libraries\\_present/](http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/libraries_present/)

## BEST PRACTICE

### Act with purpose

Public relations should develop mutual understanding between organizations and their publics. VCU Libraries formulated campaign goals so we were clear and focused on the intention of our campaign.

## BEST PRACTICE

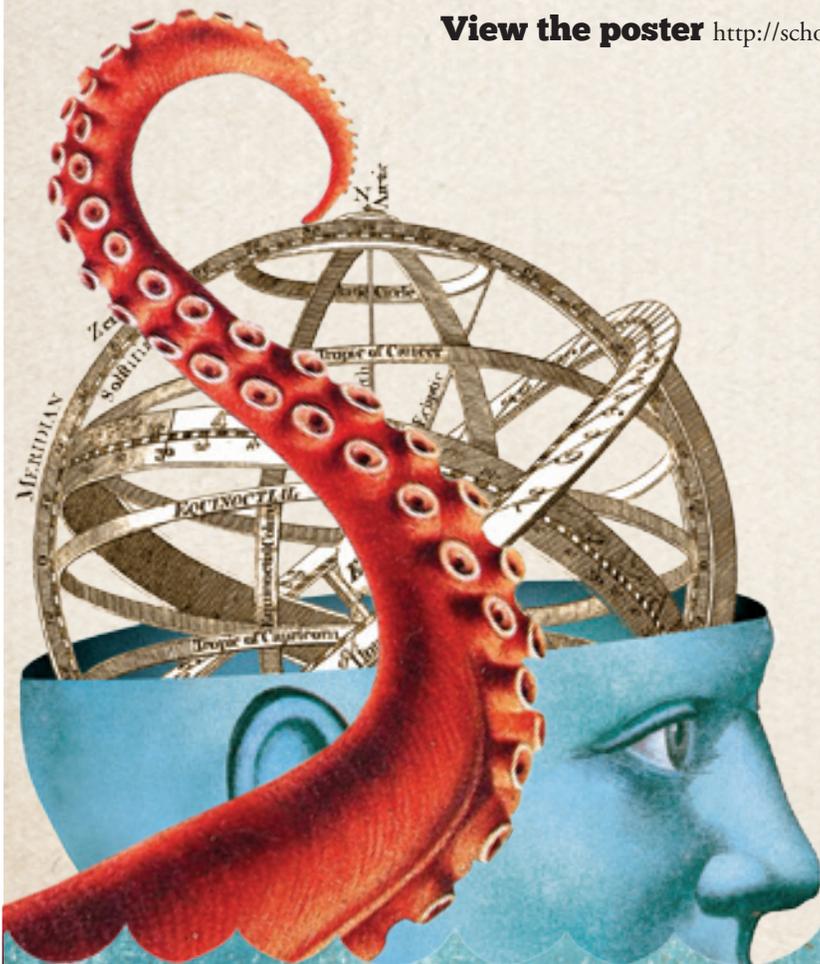
### Know your audience

Relationships are the keys to successful communication. We started by targeting some core audiences to understand the focus of our broad outreach.

## BEST PRACTICE

### Begin with the end in mind

Our goal was BROAD OUTREACH. To that end, the campaign consisted of a variety of materials including booklets, posters, key tags, handbills, and Post-It Notes. Anecdotal response to all of the pieces has been positive, but more work is required to assess the impact.



**VCU**

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

Libraries

## Hone your messages and repeat

Consistent language and themes gain notice, so say only the important things over and over and over again. Our messages were:

- VCU Libraries is a vital partner in your academic success.
- We will help you get it done faster, easier and better.
- We can help you make better grades.
- We can help you get organized.
- We will help you get stuff you need for free.
- We will teach you how to find the highest quality materials.
- We are available by text, email, chat, phone, in person.
- We have collections that are rare and special but are open to all.
- We have expert librarians in any subject matter and in your major.

## Build a team, create and make

After auditing current materials and conducting a focus group with undergraduates, we developed a two-year campaign focused on public services.

What we learned:

### 1. Timing. Give yourself enough time.

--Team started work in October; first piece printed in April.

### 2. Concept. Think it through and think some more.

--Content strategy/art direction was developed working with a designer to hone an overarching theme/title for the campaign.  
--“Your Compass” theme suggests librarians leading you in the right direction, and our library sits at a campus center paved with the design of a Compass.

### 3. Format. Use the most effective media for your messages.

-- Print still matters. Materials, handed out in one-on-one or group settings, are more lasting than fleeting digital messages for the information we wanted to share.  
-- With our high-traffic building, posters are also a key communication tool.  
-- Other high-touch materials, such as handbills were circulated at events and programs, and key tags that promoted individual research guides were handed out by subject matter specialists.

### 4. Process. Collaborate. More heads really are better than one.

-- Writing, design approval, revisions, editing and decision-making were collaborative.

### 5. Results. Execute the concept consistently.

-- The backbone of the campaign is a 4x4 inch booklet that outlines the research process and shows the library as a friendly, flexible and expert partner to help you succeed.  
-- Art direction was inspired by our comic arts collection and Steampunk images.  
-- Tone is breezy, pithy, light, specific, with short, imperative sentences



# SELECTED READINGS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

- Bernays, E. L. (1961). Crystallizing public opinion. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- Caywood, C. L. (2012). The handbook of strategic public relations and integrated communications (second ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Green, A. (2010). Creativity in public relations. Philadelphia: Kogan Page.
- Grunig, J. E., & Grunig, L. A. (1998). The relationship between public relations and marketing in excellent organizations: Evidence from the IABC study. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 4(3), 141-162. doi:10.1080/135272698345816
- Hallahan, K. (2007). Integrated communication: Implications for public relations beyond excellence. In E. L. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management: Challenges for the next generation* (pp. 299). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kinzey, R. E. (1999). Using public relations strategies to promote your nonprofit organization. New York: Haworth Press.
- Kruckeberg, D. (2000). Public relations: Toward a global professionalism. In J. A. Ledingham, & S. D. Bruning (Eds.), *Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations* (pp. 145). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Solis, B., & Breakenridge, D. (2009). Putting the public back in public relations: How social media is reinventing the aging business of PR. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: FT Press.



**VCU**

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

Libraries