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# Stick to the Message. Vary the Method.

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PAULA WALKER

Paula Walker has worked at the Tigard Library for nearly 25 years. She was Circulation Manager from 1992–2000 and became the Communications Coordinator in 2001. She has been the press secretary and speechwriter for former Montana Governor Ted Schwinden. Walker was a researcher for *Congressional Quarterly* and wrote for *National Business Woman* magazine in Washington D.C. She was also a writer/editor for *Northwest Energy News*. A jazz fan, she has been a DJ on KMHD, Portland's jazz radio station since 2000. She currently hosts a show called Cinejazz, which features jazz from film and television.

To communicate effectively, you must identify a need; prioritize what is most important; decide what you want to communicate; have it be relevant to your audience; **and then repeat it.** You can't say everything. You have to decide what is most important to say, focus on whom you are saying it to, and say it in terms it makes sense to them. **Then you have to repeat the message over and over, because people are busy and have a lot of information coming at them in a 24-hour news cycle.** (*emphasis added*)

—DEE DEE MYERS  
Former White House Spokesperson

Dee Dee Myers' quote opened the Tigard Library's 2001 Communication Plan. Our goal? To build a new library. The time frame? From November 2001 to Election Day on May 21, 2002.

While city and library staff had laid the groundwork for a new library for several years, we basically had six months to educate voters. That election required a double majority, where more than 50 percent of registered voters had to cast a ballot, and more than 50 percent of them had to say "yes." Tigard voters passed the measure 60 percent to 40 percent. It was one of only three money measures in the Portland metro area to pass in the primary that year.

The media and marketing milieu has changed a great deal over the past 14 years. Some say it has evolved. Others claim it has eroded. Are there any lessons from that successful campaign that are still applicable today?

Although social media is a useful communications tool, it is as important today as it was in 2002 to reach people in a variety of ways. More digital options exist for communicating these days, but it does not end there. In order to fully convey the sights, sounds, feel and even taste of libraries, it is helpful to approach the message from different angles.



Our communications arsenal in the 2002 bond measure campaign included publications, productions on local cable access, articles in the city and Washington County Co-operative Library Services (WCCLS) newsletters, public meetings, library programs, news stories, children's activities, civic organization meetings, community events, contests and public officials' presentations. Fourteen years later we have dropped some and added others.

### **Not All Social Media Is Online**

According to Random House Dictionary, the term "social media" was created between 2000 and 2005. It was hardly a household word in Tigard in 2002. Facebook was still two years away. Twitter hatched in spring of 2006.

Social media meant something entirely different at the beginning of the millennium. Emphasis on "social." The best way to engage people about the bond measure was face-to-face, whether in community meetings, presentations at civic organizations or by talking to people who walked through the front doors.

That gets a little tricky during a ballot measure campaign. As public employees, we could not advocate for or against ballot measures; we could only provide the facts. We could explain what the measure would and would not do, but if someone asked us if they should vote for it, we couldn't say "yes." Yet, then as now, one-on-one communication is often the most meaningful way to respond to questions and dispel misconceptions.

While we had fliers and fact sheets about the ballot measure, other evidence of the campaign existed throughout the library. Whether it was a jar encouraging people to leave their spare change to support the new library, an architectural model of what a new library might look like or an art contest inviting kids to draw their vision of a new library, library users saw constant reminders as they browsed and studied.

The drawback was in the number of people we could reach at any one time. Digital media offers the potential for a much bigger audience, but we still need to convince people to click.

### **How Do People Learn About Library Programs and Services?**

The Tigard Library has conducted a non-scientific annual survey about library services for more than 20 years. Periodically, we ask people to tell us all the ways they learn about library programs and services. The responses have changed over the past few years.

In 2012, the top five responses were:

1. Library Fliers, Posters, Brochures (in-house) 54.6 %
2. Tigard Library website 49.4 %
3. Books & Bits library e-newsletter 32.8 %
4. Cityscape city newsletter 29.2 %
5. Word-of-Mouth (friends, library staff) 18.9 %

In 2013 the Pew Research Center surveyed Americans on how they used libraries. They found that more people were using library websites. Our 2016 survey seemed to bear that out:

1. Tigard Library website 58.9 %
2. Books & Bits (Library e-newsletter) 38.6 %
3. Library posters, brochures, bookmarks (in-house) 36.6 %
4. WCCLS website 35.1 %
5. Word-of-Mouth (friends, library staff) 28.8 %



Newspapers, Facebook, Twitter, Oregonlive and Cityscape, the city's e-newsletter, were the other options listed on our survey.

As Dee Dee Myers indicates, repetition is the key to penetrating the cyclone of information that whirls around people daily. With a variety of formats, we can tell the story in different ways. Digital media has become more visual. Whether it's photos on Facebook or YouTube videos on our websites, it has become easier to bring the story of libraries to life in living color.


### Getting Started with Publicity

The greatest outcome of the Tigard Library's successful bond measure campaign was a beautiful new 48,000 square-foot library. A by-product of that success was an appreciation of the effectiveness of a concerted library public relations effort. When the library bond measure passed, both city and library officials better understood how focused publicity could benefit both the library and the city.

When I began in libraries in 1990, a professional public relations staff member was not on most library directors' radars, especially in small and medium-sized libraries. In 2001 the Tigard Library hired me on a temporary basis to run the bond measure information campaign. When it passed, Library Director Margaret Barnes convinced city officials to add the position to the budget. Tigard became the first public library in Washington County with a public relations position.

Over the years several library directors have wistfully expressed to us their desire to have a public relations position on staff. Front-line staffing is often the priority for libraries. With strained budgets, the prospect of adding an entirely new salary may cause some to cringe. Perhaps a part-time position would be more palatable. I have been the part-time Communications Coordinator at the Tigard Library for 14 years.

Although I am the coordinator, virtually every member of the staff is involved in public relations. Whether it is greeting patrons warmly as we issue them a library card or informing them about programs at our public service desks, staff engages in one-on-one social media daily, as they do in all public libraries. Our online social media effort is handled by a group of talented, creative librarians who post clever informative messages and photos on Facebook and Twitter several times a week.

For those libraries who want to ramp up their publicity efforts, begin by focusing on one small project, developing a communications plan and conveying the message in a variety of ways. Small successes can lead to larger paybacks. And above all, repeat, repeat, repeat. 

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