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Building your Network & Cultivating Relationships

While crisis may foster a sense of urgency, building an effective library advocacy network requires a sustained effort. There must be ongoing recruitment, clear structure and regular communication to keep library advocates informed and involved. In many cases, the Friends of the Library are the nucleus for such a network. While there may not be a need for formal meetings, there should be personal contact on a regular basis with your advocates.

To be most effective, your library advocacy network should represent a cross section of your campus, school or community by age, income and ethnicity. It should include members of the business community, distinguished alumni, newspaper editors and legislators, as well as library users and staff. The larger and more diverse your network—and the more powerful its members—the stronger the influence it will wield.

- **Designate** an advocacy coordinator responsible for coordinating and communicating advocacy activities with staff, board members, Friends and others. Citizen groups should work closely with the library board and administration to ensure consistency in the library message and avoid duplication of effort.
- **State your message clearly.** Provide training in how to deliver the message as part of orientation for all library staff, trustees, volunteers and advocates.
- **Survey** the library's trustees, Friends, users and supporters. What civic or professional organizations do they belong to? Are they willing to write letters, call legislators and recruit other advocates? Do they have helpful contacts with the media, administration, school board or community? Are they experienced, skilled speakers?
- **Create a database** with names of advocates, their contact information, names of their elected representatives and other pertinent information. Keep the database current. Make sure library advocates receive the library newsletter and annual report as well as updates on funding, legislation and other concerns. Set up a telephone tree and electronic mailing list to quickly disseminate action alerts.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Is your library mainstream or marginal? When community, school or campus leaders make plans and solve problems are you at the table and in the discussion? Or is the library that building that sits outside the "action" and exists on passive respect?

Passive won't do. And advocacy that doesn't include listening and building relationships won't do either.

One of the best ways to build your base of support is by working in collaboration with other organizations or departments. The library has a lot to offer potential partners as a visible, respected place with high traffic.

Don't wait for it to happen. Make it happen. Here are a few basic actions steps.

- Make a list of both existing and potential partners.
- Be strategic. Make decisions about reaching out based on your goals. Which ones are most influential? Which have goals compatible with yours? Which represent the audiences you want to reach? Who is the best person to contact?
- Make the connection. Pick up the phone. Ask your contact to lunch and invite their views on what you are trying to accomplish. The best partnership projects are hatched together.
- Be ready to work. It is healthy to serve on Boards, work on committees and get outside the library. This is how you make contacts and win respect. It is easier to build partnerships with someone you know—and knows you.
- Be open to business partnerships but be very clear about what you are asking and what you can offer in return. Put it in writing.
- Give as well as get. Think about what you can offer. Make a list. For example, many libraries have meeting and display space they make available to other organizations. The library's newsletter and Web site also offer opportunities for visibility.
- Make sure your partners get regular updates and have opportunities to give input.
- Thank everyone involved. Whether it's a personal letter, or a party or plaque, thank you is powerful.