

Our PR could be better

The following is excerpted from a talk Elma Sutherland, PRO for Carleton East, gave to the Kars WI last winter.

One thing I have come to realize in W.I. is that we are not great at public relations. It's easier to get on with the business projects and we feel a bit timid about it. When I first joined W.I. in Kenmore, and our president said we should try and get new members, I felt as if I had to get into a bikini, march up and down the street banging a drum and blowing a horn — like a one man band. My first reaction was "Who, me?" and the second "Well, how?" The answer to the first is — Yes, me and I have kind of an inkling how, but it's taken me a long time.

One answer to "how" is to be prepared and know about W.I. A long time ago a lady asked me "Just what do you do in W.I.?" I was completely unprepared and stammered that we met once a month and did community work. Well, who doesn't?

I looked up the definition of public relations in the dictionary. It says public relations is the **business** of representing and promoting the interests and reputation of an organization.

If we were pros selling cheese, the **business** would be making and selling cheese. We'd **represent** that we make cheese, we'd **promote** it by saying cheese is good for you. It is in our **interests** to let people know that we make good cheese and our **reputation** relies on our product.

I've tried to fit Women's Institute into the same **business** category and if we look at it that way it is clear that we have a good product to sell.

Representing — we represent thousands of women, their hard work, past accomplishments.

Promoting we do by trying to create interest, by writing newspaper reports and we should try radio and T.V. You like Women's Institute, I like it — for sure other women would like it. We're just a bit timid about talking about ourselves.

The **interests** — they are legion and if new members are informed they will find something that will catch

Elma Sutherland



their imagination.

Our **reputation**, I think — is that we are dependable, righteous, careful and maybe a bit stodgy.

We've got a lot going for us and the only difficult part to me is promoting. With so many loonies getting the ink, the good old reliables don't appear interesting. But we are interesting, you know it and I know it. Maybe information is not getting through to our members. When delegates come back from area and district meetings, we depend on her to get the message to the member. We announced the PRO workshop at the district delegates' meeting and gave each delegate a notice for the branch PRO. But one branch PRO called me the night before the meeting. She hadn't heard about it and couldn't go. Fortunately that doesn't happen too often.

Sometimes delegates complain that when they give their reports, branch members are not listening. Perhaps it is written on scraps of paper. There are long pauses while the next piece is found. Or the delegate cannot read her writing. Or it goes on far too long. I personally feel that any branch report longer than 20 minutes should be a "hand-out". While we owe our delegates our attention, the delegates shouldn't bore us either.

Those of us who heard Hal Anthony of CFRA speak at Vernon W.I. on public relations were disappointed and surprised. Hal Anthony gave us an honest assessment of our profile and what he hears about W.I. in the media. Nothing. That's an unpleasant surprise. He predicted that without better public relations we'd be finished in 20 years. Into history with the bustle and the washboard.

Fortunately as can be seen by our past performance, we are not totally dependent upon the media for our existence. Yet every year branches disband and membership goes down. If corporations spend millions on public relations, maybe we should

spend a little to promote W.I. and the work we do, if it may mean our survival. On photostating, on posters, on postage. Maybe a few dollars spent on flyers in the neighbourhood. With so many organizations competing for attention, we can't expect women to join if they've never heard of us and don't know what we do. Publicity for our goals as well as ourselves may be a responsibility.

The reports are steadily improving. Charlotte Johnson, our provincial president reminded us to make sure and have a catchy beginning. If we start off with Greely-Manotick Station W.I. held their October meeting etc. a lot of people will stop and read no further. But if we put in "They all took their clothes off at Sadie Payne's" everybody would read it to find out why. We often leave out interesting details. I read one where the branch had a speaker on Siam. What did she say about Siam? What do we learn at a branch meeting? Did you learn that false teeth have a radio active substance. You didn't know that! Somebody who reads your report might not know it. A newspaper report is also a chance to plug W.I. or a W.I. project and it's free! Usually though, the PROs do a real good job and we are getting publicity. I have collected some clippings that you might want to look at later.

When we think about public relations we usually think about its impact on people who are not members. We also have to consider internal relations. Complaints from members. We can't expect good public relations from a dissatisfied member. No one likes complaints but we've got to answer them.

We are all PRO's in our own way. I'd like to suggest the ABCs of good public relations. A is for being Aware. Aware of past accomplishments and present goals of W.I. Also for Accountability. And for Acceptance — to accept changes, accept new ideas and accept responsibility. B — is for businesslike. In our reports and methods. C — is for confidence. In ourselves and our organization which is terrific. It's easy to sell a good product. Women's Institute is good for you.