



## Imagemakers: Mormons and the Media

"It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer."

*Charlotte's Web*

Just as E. B. White's Wilbur appreciated the great value of a true friend who was also a good writer, the Church now searches for good friends who are good writers, and good broadcasters, good actors, good technicians—in fact, good communicators of all kinds. Through this conscious attention to "public relations" the Church hopes to create a "favorable image"—frequently, like Wilbur, "RADIANT" and "HUMBLE," but always "GOOD PEOPLE."

A history of Mormonism in public relations terms would be both lively and instructive. Our interest in image-making began early, dating, in a sense from

Joseph Smith's Wentworth letter and the inclusion of his "own story" in the Pearl of Great Price. In 1859 Brigham Young granted what Daniel Boorstin has called the "first full-fledged modern interview with a well-known public figure." Not much later the polygamous wives of Mormondom went forth in the cause of women's suffrage—in an effective if not totally successful response to an image the "gentile media" was fixing on the Church and its peculiar institution. Since then it has been "their" image-makers versus "our" image-makers.

As market sophistication has increased, the Church has moved beyond its early amateur efforts—missionary work, member example, word of mouth. Now Church PR is handled by dedicated, full-time, professionally trained specialists. The low-keyed offers of an abbreviated home evening manual on the Church's recent TV special, *The Family . . . and other living things* brought over 90,000 requests within a few days of the broadcast.

Whether "professionalization" of Mormon image-making will escape the pitfalls of Madison Avenue remains to be seen. Reality is Mormonism's strongest selling point—be it historical heritage, contemporary experience, or the plain Gospel truths. Yet adherence to reality has not always been the strong suit of professional public relations. As we polish our presentations, will we be able to accept and present a clear view of ourselves and our history?

In this issue, *Dialogue* looks at some image makers, historical and modern, Mormon and gentile.