Advertising and the Scholarly Journal: Selling Audience

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Speakers:
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“Advertising in the traditional sense is dead.” As the AMA Manual of Style notes, advertising is often considered to be “an unfortunate necessity.” Although it can be a major source of revenue for publications, perceptions of bias and infringement can shake readers’ trust and make journal stakeholders understandably nervous about venturing into new frontiers.

Today, more potential pathways are available to reach audiences than ever before. From print and web pages to mobile and virtual events, as journals look to diversify revenue streams and advertisers seek to move beyond traditional print pages, editors and publishers may struggle to find the right balance in advertising content, format, and placement for their publications.

According to Christopher Hoag, of Kenyon Hoag Associates, advertisers today want to narrow their focus, direct content to the most appropriate audience within the scientific information ecosystem, and buy and place ads in different ways to support and participate in scientific communication.

Whereas traditional advertising casts a wide net, in the hopes that a message will reach the right person at the right time, new advertising models seek to create opportunities to put relevant content directly in front of those to whom it is most relevant. By highlighting new products and tools to a niche audience, alongside relevant peer-reviewed, unbiased content, advertisers hope to become a partner on the cutting edge of research. Advertising is part of the information ecosystem that exists in the scientific community, notifying the community of new products, technologies, and processes as part of an ongoing cycle: research, discovery, commercialization, and awareness (advertising).

Moderator Stephanie Holland, of American Chemical Society Publications, paused to ask audience members if they were familiar with the concept of native advertising—nonintrusive advertising content embedded within users’ experience. Eschewing the traditional panel discussion format, Holland’s question-and-answer format gave this session the more intense feel of a workshop and encouraged the audience to participate in the discussion throughout.

“Publishing is a landscape fraught with peril.” Jonathan Christison, of Elsevier’s Cell Press, discussed various models for pairing peer-reviewed content with advertising, from microsites to sponsored open access. The journal benefits from the recirculation and promotion of published content, potentially affecting the impact factor and new audiences, and advertisers are able to “ride the coattails” of valuable published content to direct their messages to readers.

Panelists also reviewed best practices for managing the relationship between the editorial and commercial sides of a partnership between journals and advertisers and the related ethical concerns. To maintain the integrity of the scientific content and avoid perceptions of bias, publishers and advertisers should identify their common ground, set clear boundaries for their work together, and establish a cohesive vision that enables them to strike a balance between editorial content with peripheral messaging from the advertiser. Although advertisers may want some degree of control over content, the system for selecting material for inclusion in advertising programs should be established early on and closely followed. Advertisers cannot be allowed to manipulate content, but they might be allowed to cherry pick from a selection of published content or simply be invited to sponsor a selection of editor-curated content. In this way, the journal always maintains authority over content, helping to prevent real or perceived conflicts of interest.

Advertising is an uphill battle for journals. The many stakeholders bring to the table many and varied priorities and goals. Although the return to journals may be great, with increased revenue and potentially higher usage, advertising must be carefully and very closely managed. As the panelists acknowledged, there is a perception of advertising as the “Big Bad Wolf,” but enlightened advertisers will understand the concerns of editors and the need to collaborate with journals to provide information and market their content in a way that is credible and reliable.