

Small Frogs in a Big Pond—How Do International Journals Compete?

Speakers:

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“We try harder” might be considered the underlying theme of the small-journals session. The session presented two case studies to show Canadian and Australian perspectives.

Jennifer Douglas, deputy editor, and John Hoey, editor, discussed the *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)*. The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) publishes the *CMAJ* 25 times per year, distributing it to 1500 paid subscribers and members of CMA. Readers of the print journal are mainly Canadian physicians. The electronic journal is free, and only 54% of its readers are Canadian. Competition among general medical journals is heavy, but *CMAJ* holds its place in the world’s top 10. It attracts and keeps authors and readers. Its editorial board members work with authors and potential authors, especially inexperienced ones, in a helpful, friendly manner to build lasting relationships that will garner future submissions. To broaden international exposure, they invite experts outside Canada to be referees and to write review articles and commentaries on *CMAJ* articles.

Attracting readers is the second part of

the process. Hoey observed that readership is changing in the electronic world. New readers are young, female, and not necessarily Canadian or even health professionals. To monitor new readers, a readers’ panel has been established. It comprises 24 young readers who will be surveyed four times per year. Press releases highlighting key articles are sent to the mass media. Hoey spends a substantial amount of time talking to journalists. “We’ll try anything . . . new features, such as an educational section for clinicians and e-CME, shorter items in the news section . . . [and] rewriting titles and abstracts to make them informative and accurate for MEDLINE users”, Hoey said.

*Electronic publishing
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distance” ...*

Andrew Stammer presented the Australian view. Stammer is the journals publisher of CSIRO, a government research organization that publishes 18 journals and 50 books per year. CSIRO confronts the same problems as Canadians but in addition the “tyranny of distance”. Only 2% of the world’s science takes place in Australia. In that environment, CSIRO has made its publishing arm into an autonomous, self-sufficient business unit. CSIRO owns 11 of the 18 journals it publishes, and Australian scientific societies own the other seven. The challenges faced are those of distance and “cultural cringe”, which assumes that homegrown journals cannot possibly be as good as “international” journals. Overseas researchers may also perceive an Australian journal as out of the mainstream. Some advantages have

to be exploited, however; many Australian scientists are recognized internationally as among the best in their fields.

To compete internationally, small journals must deliver electronic products as effectively as do competitors. Electronic publishing overcomes the “tyranny of distance” and improves international exposure. CSIRO has accomplished that. Perhaps foremost for the survival of small journals is the need to give the primary community served a sense of ownership. The sense of ownership by the Australian scientific community is reinforced by the structure of governing bodies that oversee the journals. Each journal has an editorial advisory committee to set journal policy, and these committees report annually to a Board of Standards that is composed of senior CSIRO scientists and representatives of the Australian Academy of Science. The responsibility of the Board of Standards is to ensure the scientific quality of the journals and oversee their progress. The Australian scientific community is now committed to the journals. With internationally known scientists submitting content and with electronic distribution, these small journals can reach and be reached by a global scientific community.

The overall message in both presentations was that journals may be seen as regional by virtue of their titles and that some of the local focus can and does play a valuable role in international scientific and medical communication. Small journals need to encourage their local scientists to have confidence in the place of the journals in the global scheme of things. To survive, editors must work with local communities in exploiting local talent in support of their journals. 