

A Question of Electronic Add-ons

A journal has started to include Web-only items that supplement the printed content. Most of those items are videos, but some are still images, articles, or other text. The staff of the journal and its parent organization lack the time and expertise to determine how best to deal with this material, for example, to work out technical difficulties when files are too big, formats are odd, or labeling is not adequately integrated (if it is there at all) while making sure the Web supplements are rich in scientific content and easily navigated. The electronics department sometimes wants just to “reject” potential Web-only items, whereas the editorial staff wants to make them work. The editor of the journal seeks your guidance regarding this situation. What would you advise her?

Solutions

There needs to be a sitdown between the journal staff and the parent organization (including the marketing department, if there is one). The benefits of the Web-only content under consideration need to be determined. Is it a benefit of membership or subscription? Do your readers love it (do you have research to show this)? Does it bring in more subscribers? Has traffic on the site increased substantially because of it? Do you have advertising on the site that supports this content? Those are questions we discuss often at my company for all our publication Web sites. If the content is of significant benefit to the publication and has the support of the parent organization, resources should be devoted to it. I recommend adding a part-time (or full-time) staff member (depending on the volume of content) who works under the editorial umbrella but is a liaison to your IT department in creating and posting the Web-only content. This possibly could be a freelance function. If the content is determined to be good but not of benefit to the journal, I suggest not spending time and effort on it. Whatever decision is made now will have to be reassessed regularly as Web habits and traffic change.

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A journal editor can offer a rich variety of information on the Web that is not available in the printed edition, such as videos, sound, additional photographs, and computer modeling. If the staff responsible for adding such enhancements to the journal's Web site are reluctant to deal with such supplemental material, the editorial staff and Web staff should try to establish guidelines and standards so that each submission does not present a new problem. If technical issues that the Web staff cannot handle arise, perhaps a short-term consultant could train them so that adding supplemental material to the Web site becomes routine. If the technical problems are defeated but this effort still demands too much time, perhaps adding the supplemental material to the journal's Web site could be contracted to specialists. As an editorial staff adds increasingly complex supplemental material to the journal's Web site, it may be useful to evaluate the cost of doing the work inhouse or contracting it to an outside firm. The CSE Web site does not include any of these complex enhancements, but their addition would not be a technical problem, although there would be financial implications. The site is hosted and maintained by an experienced firm that also hosts nearly 200 other sites, many of which are far more complex than the CSE site.

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The people on the journal may have entered into Web publishing without thoroughly investigating the requirements of time, effort, training, and costs and without formulating a plan. Before they go further, they should analyze what has been most successful for them thus far and set up requirements for Web-only submissions that fall within what they know they can do successfully. Reject items that do not fit within those limits. Setting up and publishing the requirements for Web submissions is key. Meanwhile, talk with other organizations and journals of similar size and focus that have been publishing

Web-only items for a while. Learn what their experience has been—the pitfalls and successes—and the costs. Most will share their knowledge willingly. Review and use their Web sites as a guide.

Survey journal readers and site users about what Web-only content they would like to see. Don't make decisions only on the basis of what a few people in the editorial office or the association like. Then put together what you have learned from other journals, what your readers and users would like to see, and the cost of doing this inhouse or through a provider. Plan what you want your Web site and content to be from what you've learned through your investigations—what you need and can afford now and how you might be able to expand and enrich your content as needs evolve. And remember: operating a Web site in house has costs in time, labor, training and retraining, software, and equipment. Look into a provider that might be able to manage your Web content for you; find a provider with whom it is easy to communicate. Learn about the experience that other journals have had with each provider you investigate—whether 24-hour service is available, whether the provider is a going concern, and what its costs and levels of service are compared with those of other providers and compared with operating and maintaining your own Web site in house.

Publishing on the Web is challenging and expensive, but it provides many opportunities to disseminate information at times and in formats that are not available in print. Good luck!

Nancy Wachter

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Web-only material raises two kinds of problems: content-related and technical. The content problems could be managed by the editor's requiring that the Web-only material meet the same strict scientific guidelines used for manuscripts, including organization, scientific merit, and source referencing. I suggest adding specific guidelines for Web content to the journal's author guidelines.

The technical problems are more chal-

lenging. As an editor who has worked with electronic submission of manuscripts since 1985, when Mac and Windows programs and several word-processor programs used incompatible file types, I know that the technical aspects can be time-consuming and frustrating. I suggest turning some responsibility for technical format over to the authors, many of whom have learned to meet strict manuscript-style guidelines. They could be required to submit additional Web material in the style that can be used by your technical professionals, who could then add a Web-page guidelines section to your author guidelines describing the type of addendum materials that make good Web pages, the length, and the format requirements. If submitted material does not meet both content and technical criteria, you, as the editor, can reject the Web-only section, separately or with the manuscript. Technical problems should resolve over time as Web publishing matures. I remember, not fondly, the days when half the floppy disks submitted by authors were blank or did not work (damaged in the mail, disk never formatted, or file never saved to disk). You are on the cutting edge to have Web-added material available for readers. Develop the submission guidelines to help you through the practical aspects, and you will find the current technical challenges easier to resolve.

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New Question: A Question of Design

Your print journal has had the same design for many years. Although it has served well and you have received few specific complaints, the look seems "tired", and you feel that it may be time to freshen it. Whom would you consult, and how would you go about determining the new design (if any) and implementing it? Would you consider any or some combination of these in coming up with the new design: survey the editorial board, survey the readership, ask a focus group, hire a consultant, study other journals, ask the typesetters, send to a designer (in house or outside)?

The situations described as new questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Department of Medical Editing, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, 1800 Harrison Street, 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94712-3429. Telephone (510) 625-2373; fax (510) 625-5231; e-mail della.mundy@kp.org.