

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)?

Solutions

I was responsible for three redesigns as editor of *The Pharmaceutical Journal* between 1987 and 2000. I looked carefully at other publications, consulted colleagues (publishing and advertising, as well as editorial), and drew up a specification to be used by a professional typographic designer. Three designers were approached on each occasion and were asked to provide two concepts each: one conservative, the other progressive. The concepts included an internal page or pages and the cover. When received, these were shown to the same colleagues originally consulted and to the chief executive of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and other staff members. A designer was then chosen from among the three to come up with a complete redesign.

In the latest of the redesign processes I was responsible for, the designer provided grids in QuarkXPress for each type of page with stylesheets for the various typographic elements that might be included in such a page. The editorial staff of *The Pharmaceutical Journal* make up pages using the grids and stylesheets provided by the designer, importing text and illustrations as necessary. With a weekly publication, speed is essential, and having all editorial staff capable of working with the page-makeup software means that a lot of pages can be processed at the same time. Monthly time scales lead to a more relaxed process in which pages can be made up by design or production staff and checked and

passed by editorial staff. *The Pharmaceutical Journal* has just had a further redesign under its new editor, about which the editorial board (not a body that existed in my day) was consulted. The Council of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, the publisher, was shown the redesign before it was put into effect. This stage was informational rather than consultative, although if any council member had had reservations—none had—the editor would have had to listen, I feel.

All publications need to be “refreshed” on a regular basis, in my opinion. Only a few can get away with staying the same for years.

Douglas Simpson
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Although the design of the *New England Journal of Medicine* had been changed in 1996 and was still up to date, we decided late in 2001 that further changes were needed to accommodate the new editorial features we had created in the previous 2 years (among them topical perspective articles, clinical practice articles, “This Week in the *Journal*” article summaries, and continuing medical education). With this aim in mind, we began with a broad staff discussion of what we wanted to improve and, as important, what we did not want to lose. From this brainstorming, we put together a list of clear goals, some of which took us beyond the new features that had been our impetus for change. We wanted to enhance the functionality of the *Journal*’s design, make it simple for readers to navigate through, and make it esthetically inviting, with a clean, uncrowded look. With our 200-year history, we also wanted to balance the traditional and the contemporary.

We took our list of goals to two firms of professional magazine and book designers, who, through meetings with a small *Journal* team, produced a series of proposed new designs. Through months of back-and-forth experimentation, we settled first on the basic elements of a new design and then on details of size, color, and placement. With the help of readability

studies and two firms of type designers, we developed new fonts. As we closed in on the solutions we liked, we showed the new design to small groups of readers throughout the country to get their point of view.

In mid-2002, we printed a prototype of the new *Journal*. There were some striking changes: We modified the layout of our table of contents on the cover, added flexibility in our sometimes complicated tables (through layout changes and shading) and graphics (through a unified color palette), reorganized the page layout and the placement of elements on the page, expanded our use of color, unified the design vocabulary, added full-sized type in methods sections, and put each article's abstract on its own page. The *Journal's* Web site, which was redesigned in tandem, had a new look and clear signposts to our new features and subscriber services. Six months of production work later, the new *New England Journal of Medicine* appeared in January 2003.

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New England Journal of Medicine
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I have been involved in the design or redesign of two journals, three newsletters, and two annual reports—all small publications of limited circulation and even more limited resources. The following guidelines have evolved from my experiences with these ventures and may not apply to megajournals.

Redesign Tip 1: First, I hope there are better reasons to embark on a redesign than feeling that the old face of your publication needs freshening up. Readers get attached to a familiar appearance and organization, they know just where to find their favorite features and what to expect when they get there, and you shouldn't disturb their comfort on a whim. Know why you are doing it—that is, what it is about the old look that no longer fits the bill—and what you hope to accomplish with a new one. The basic production issues—page count, frequency, trim size, pagination, color vs black, stock for both

copy and covers, advertising—should be settled beforehand in consultation with your publication's accountant, managing editor, designer, and printer. Expect the update to be costlier because of greater use of color and graphics and more white space—the marks of a modern look. Secure a modest budget allowance for the redesign process to subsidize meetings and meals if necessary.

Redesign Tip 2: Enlist the services of a good designer. Now you are ready to proceed with the redesign. A designer is a publication's most prized asset. (A good printer is also more valuable than rubies, but that's the subject of another essay.) If the designer happens to work in house, rejoice in your good fortune; if she does not, hire her. When we made the transition from *CBE Views* to *Science Editor*, we were lucky to have Tiffany Inbody already on board, thanks to Barbara Gastel. Tiffany is as talented as she is tactful; dealing with editor clients can't be the walk in the park she pretends it is.

Redesign Tip 3: Ask your friends for suggestions. Colleagues will be generous with their expertise and always happy to offer opinions. *Science Editor* was born from ideas that were bounced among small groups assembled informally during a CSE conference. Tiffany participated in these mini-think tanks, listened, and took notes. (It is better to keep these sessions short and have people rotate through than to try to resolve all issues in a single sitting.) From her notes, Tiffany later produced three mockups representing different interpretations of the various comments she'd heard. The *SE* staff ranked their choices, and the winner was presented to the CSE Board for approval.

Redesign Tips 4, 5, and 6: Be critical of your design effort, be prepared to tweak it when that is called for, and be flexible. From issue to issue, readers will not notice minor adjustments of font size, spacing, heading style, and other typographic fine points as long as the fundamentals remain user-friendly.

Grace Darling

Selected Readings in Plastic Surgery
The University of Texas Southwestern
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New Question: A Question of Replication

A graduate student in biochemistry has been working on his dissertation project for 3 years. The research is based on furthering the results of a postdoctoral fellow who has been working in the laboratory for 5 years. The graduate student has been working on an enzyme in DNA repair, and the laboratory has funding for cancer research. The enzyme is well characterized, and kinetics and genetics results on it have been published (in a total of 10 papers). However, the student has been unable to replicate the enzyme purification so far, and his contradictory results have always been discarded in favor of the postdoctoral fellow's data. The postdoctoral fellow leaves for a different institution with the "highest recommendation" of the principal investigator of the laboratory. When the student then analyzes the source material (the highly pure and highly active enzyme that the fellow has left in the freezer), it does not have the published activity, and

the student surmises with the principal investigator that the fellow may have falsified data. When asked to return and to purify an enzyme for independent analysis, the fellow is unable to produce a sample that could be verified by another source. The graduate student leaves the original laboratory and is assigned to another research project; but the original laboratory has never published a retraction of the work and has told the student that "everyone that needs to know [about the retraction] has been notified"; the student has been asked, "What if the newspapers get hold of this?" How should this graduate student proceed?

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.