

Adding Value to the Journal: Is It Worth the Cost and Effort?

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In these turbulent times, many journals are facing the difficult question, How can publishers add more value? The value-added functions of publishers and journals include providing peer review; technical editing and copyediting; print production; Web production; marketing; and commissioned extra pieces. This session focused on the commissioned extras—"the stuff folks read", such as editorials, reviews, news and debate, book reviews, meeting reports, cartoons or lighter pieces, historical articles, and training, continuing education, and professional development. The two presenters provided two different perspectives, both with a focus on attracting readers as opposed to pleasing authors.

First, Janet O'Flaherty, a managing editor for the BMJ Publishing Group, presented a case study of the *Education in Heart (EiH)* series. *Heart* is a co-owned journal with a growing membership and declining paid subscriptions. A series of articles that would form an accredited core curriculum

in cardiology was first considered in 1997. A commissioning team was established in 1998, and the first article was published in 2002. The budget for the first 3 years was £250,000 (about US\$425,000), which included a substantial honorarium for authors. The commissioning process involved developing prescriptive instructions for authors, holding team meetings to decide on curriculum and authors, and making informal approaches to prospective authors.

Was the program a success? O'Flaherty believes that overall the program has gone extraordinarily well. On the downside, few participants have applied for credits. Five multiple-choice questions accompany each article, and participants with an 80% pass mark received 3 continuing professional development credits. Unfortunately, although the journal was prepared to accept questionnaires electronically, the accrediting foundation was not; therefore, participants were required to mail in completed questionnaires. Of 1500 questionnaires distributed, 25 were returned.

On the upside, *EiH* is now in its fifth year—remember, the initial budget was for 3 years. The series is the most accessed part of the online journal. Eight of the top 10 most accessed articles in 2003 were part of *EiH*. Although *EiH* accounts for only 1.6% of the total articles in *Heart*, 19% of total use and 29% of all PDF downloads were from the series. Several of the other BMJ journals have copied the series, which is not surprising inasmuch as *Heart* has the highest revenue of the 21 BMJ journals, from pay-per-view. O'Flaherty showed statistics indicating that *Heart* compared favorably with another BMJ journal, the *Journal of Medical Genetics*, with respect to PDF downloads, page impressions, and unique Web-site visitors. Those measures

seem to indicate that readers appreciate the series.

Creig Hoyt, clinical editor of the *British Journal of Ophthalmology (BJO)*, has also been focusing on readers' wishes. He wanted to add value to his journal but with little or no capital investment. To compete with slick corporate-sponsored throwaway publications and the numerous other ophthalmology journals, Hoyt improved the look and readability of his journal and added a few surprises for the readers.

Interesting photographs on the cover and in the table of contents improved the journal's look. More editorials, provocative commentaries that included more politically and socially relevant pieces, and new special features about international issues and value-based ophthalmology improved readability. In response to readers' suggestions, articles were shortened and long reviews eliminated. A section called *BJO at a Glance*, a page of short editorials designed to add perspective, was added.

Hoyt included video reports as one of the added surprises. The surgery videos available at the Web site have become quite popular. Cartoons have also been added and, despite some initial resistance, have been well received—a situation that O'Flaherty also encountered at *Heart*.

Have the changes at *BJO* paid off? Submissions have increased by more than 50%, and Hoyt has informally received a lot of positive comments. The value-based ophthalmology pieces are well read and quoted by policy-makers. Overall, Hoyt believes that the changes were worth while. He speculated that in 10 to 15 years the added-value sections of journals may be all that survives as hardcopy. ☺