

Listening to Our Readers

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Despite its nickname, the “Green Journal” heard nothing about global warming when listening to readers. The green-covered *Obstetrics & Gynecology* is the 55-year-old publication of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). In the first part of this session, Rebecca S Benner, managing editor, shared why and how *Obstetrics & Gynecology* recently surveyed readers and what changes the survey data led to. In the second part of the session, attendees heard a publisher’s perspective on readership surveys from Angela Brady, vice president of Stratton Publishing and Marketing, Inc.

Editors of *Obstetrics & Gynecology* designed their survey in part to determine whether such new features as In the Trenches—clinical information for rarely encountered situations, such as “house calls at 30,000 feet”—were resonating with readers. About one-third of recipients responded to two waves of mailed print surveys, and about one-tenth responded to two e-mail invitations to participate in the survey via the Web. Survey data showed that the feature ACOG Practice Bulletins had the highest readership: 93%

of responders “usually look at/read” it. On the other end of the scale was Letters to the Editor, the least-read regular feature. Where the survey asked for suggestions, a repeated request from readers was for greater emphasis on gynecology.

After reviewing the survey data, the editors and editorial board kept seven features “as is”, including letters to the editor, a crucial part of scientific communication; modified three features, for example, by publishing them less often or only online; and dropped one feature that the survey confirmed was weak, as had been suspected. Editors and staff now monitor submissions and acceptances by subject. And the proportion of the journal devoted to gynecology has been increased.

Stratton Publishing and Marketing, Inc, designs research tools for its journal clients and helps clients apply what is learned via the tools. Stratton finds that because readers’ interests shift, because science and its treatment change, and because *all* readers report not having enough time to read, readership surveys should be frequent—every 2 years, if possible. They also should be used for such reasons as changes in journal frequency or format; decreases in audience involvement, as shown by decreases in queries, contributions, or requests for papers; or a need for increased scrutiny of expenses.

The survey instrument should be built with the end in mind. For example, a journal considering launching an electronic supplement to a print version should ask readers about their preferred format of a supplement (Web, print, or e-news) and about the likelihood that they would read an e-supplement. Surveying a random (by ZIP code) sample of 1000 to 1500 core readers routinely generates 400 responses, which is usually sufficient to meet the 95% confidence interval of a statistically valid survey. Web-based surveys can be considered if e-mail addresses of more than

85% of readers are known, but Web is not much cheaper than print. Whether print or online, the survey should be timed right. Spring and fall surveys generate the most responses. When possible, avoid overlapping with a large mailing by some other group or a big conference. Incentives for completing the survey, such as a drawing for a \$50 gift certificate or a particular book, are well worth their cost. Incentives should be anonymous—unlinked from survey responses.

Stratton measures results against satisfaction benchmarks developed by aggregating data from several client surveys. Low readership scores can be addressed with tighter editing and by incorporating more entry points, such as subheads, into articles. Poor scores for relevance and for actions taken after reading, such as forwarding an article to a colleague, can be addressed by changing to a briefer and newsier format with practical takeaway messages. Remember: A publication cannot do everything, but re-examining its mission can help to provide focus. 🔥