

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS  
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# Future-proofing your journal: today's essentials, tomorrow's strategies

BMJ Journals hosted its inaugural "Today's essentials, tomorrow's strategies" seminar in July 2009. A range of expert speakers addressed the theme of "future-proofing your journal", and explained the role of contract publishing partners in helping society publishers to successfully balance member needs with publishing and technological evolution.

## Peter Ashman

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Peter Ashman, Publishing Director of BMJ and BMJ Journals, opened proceedings by introducing the BMJ Group and its Affinity programme, which provides contract publishing services to a range of biomedical societies. Ashman then listed some of the issues currently affecting society publishers.

### Current challenges include:

- library budgets, now falling by up to 25%
- print to online transition; associated revenue attrition
- pace of technological evolution
- entry into emerging markets
- publisher consolidation and big deal domination
- ensuring timeliness and quality of peer review
- open access
- competition for good authors
- revenue attrition in jobs market – falling by up to 45%
- new communications channels
- user-generated content
- macro issues: economy



affinity

## The Landscape of Society Publishing

CEO of publishers' association STM, noted the unique features of the medical publishing market; for example, medical publishers are considerably more dependent (15%) on advertising revenues than science and technology publishers (2%). They are more at risk, therefore, from the transition to the online medium, which has proven to be less attractive to advertisers. Medical publishers also have a broader customer base – beyond individual academics and institutional researchers, they serve healthcare and pharmaceutical organisations – that has been a factor in the evolution of two distinct business models, the advertising-supported 'magazine' model and the subscription-based 'research journal' model. These differences impact the challenges faced and the manner in which they are addressed; for example, the medical community has been relatively slow to adapt to digital content, but there is now a growing demand for point-of-care tools, materials and delivery formats.

The digital publishing revolution, Mabe said, has created strategic challenges (for example, relating to copyright or business models) and operational challenges (for example, relating to staff skills and software / hardware needs). We must also acknowledge and address misconceptions and expectations of ill-informed users and politicians (see "Mabe's myths").

Mabe positioned open access and Web 2.0 as both threat and opportunity: although the proliferation of user-generated content has already sounded the death knell for several local newspapers globally, and could similarly undermine the authority systems upon which scholarly publishing depends, collaborative social software (such as wikis) has potential if sustainable business models can be found. Likewise, widespread 'green' open access (author self-archiving) could cause the publishing ecosystem to collapse, but the various potential payment models of 'gold' open access are an opportunity to be explored.

### Mabe's myths

- e = free  
(intangible content has no value)
- yours = mine  
(sharing content is acceptable)
- public funding = public access (an expectation not found in other sectors e.g. sport)
- intellectual property = theft  
(e.g. Copyleft movement)

### In response to questions, Mabe added:

- *no business model is without risk, but in the current economic environment and given advertisers' resistance to online transition, the journal subscription model is likely to be less vulnerable than the magazine advertising model (question from Toby Charkin, Pharma-Tox and Life Science Journals)*
- *proposed WIPO changes threaten publishers' protection under copyright laws so publisher licences need to be very specific about what is permitted and what is prohibited (question from Suzanne Jarvis, Veterinary Record)*
- *the impact factor does not threaten the journal model, but (Peter Ashman added) in a commercial context it is a flawed system that can spiral journals into decline (question from Raanan Gillon, Institute of Medical Ethics).*

## Societies' perceptions of the future

Director of marketing agency TBI Communications, Melinda Kenneway, presented and interpreted the results of BMJ Journals' research into 'what societies want' (see Peter Ashman's article in *Learned Publishing*, doi:10.1087/2009307). Societies accept that current strategies do not sufficiently ensure future relevance and success, and that in seeking to continue meeting the needs of their discipline and their members, they must evolve and ensure they continue to be valued by their multiple audiences – members, government and so on. Listening to members will be key to long-term success.

The survey results showed society publishers perceived functions relating to **communications** to be most highly rated by their members (events, journals and newsletters). However, the low rating accorded to online fora suggests that societies have yet to find a digital communications channel that appeals strongly to members or that can be readily monetised. Kenneway asserted that it is important for societies to take the long view, and innovate now to protect their future role in the scholarly information supply chain.

Similarly, although societies recognised that **career development** is a significant opportunity (particularly in the medical field, where Continuing Medical Education requirements are continually

evolving), education rated lowly in the survey. This, said Kenneway, is a big and valuable market that societies should be entering, and it's important to invest now in building the society brand with future members.

**Secondary rights** is another area that was underrated by respondents; software development in workflow solutions is beginning to reshape how content is used and licensed, and societies or their publishing partners will need to be ready to negotiate complex licences to maximise the reach of their content. Meanwhile it is heartening to see a number of societies considering launching **new journals** in the next five years, and individual title development (to serve niche specialties) is also a key publishing skill.

Kenneway concluded that as we move into an exciting future for society publishers, we need to reconsider the skills and resources that will support new services, more modular publishing operations, more holistic publishing programmes and more customised partnerships. Societies have the community connections and long-term understanding of their discipline to build a successful future – as long as they are able to "think like a teenager, be light on your feet, stay lean and don't invest too much in a single area".

*During questions, Tom Smith (British Society of Gastroenterology) reflected some of Kenneway's points in sharing his organisation's experience of a recent newsletter and imminent journal launch. "Our discipline has become highly specialised, and our journal [Gut] had become very scientific. Members clearly articulated that there was a gap in the market for something more immediate, more patient-oriented. Our journal which launches in Spring 2010 publishes guidelines and articles of relevance to practicing clinicians, and we wanted to raise the issues behind the guidelines to better engage our members."*

## What societies want from a contract publishing partner

"In an ideal world, societies would seek maximum return with minimum effort," began Stephen Hancocks OBE, Editor-in-Chief of the *British Dental Journal* and Editor of the *International Dental Journal*. "But realistically, societies seek a partnership of mutual benefit." He drew attention to the "different mindsets" and strategic processes of commercial organisations and societies, illustrated by the commercial organisation's ability to innovate with greater efficiency and agility than a society that must seek approval from a range of committees.

Conflict can arise within a society's publishing programme when determining how best to communicate multiple types of information – research, news, journalistic features and opinion – particularly for learned societies with a historic brand to protect. In this context, suggested Hancocks, a publishing partner can help to provide the objectivity that is key to clarifying and implementing a strategic vision. In opting to contract their publishing activities, Hancocks suggested society publishers look for:

**Trust.** Operational and business development aspects of a relationship are built on a foundation of trust.

**Guidance.** Many staff within societies associate publishing with little more than printing. The breadth of processes is a mystery that an experienced and insightful contract publisher partner can help to unravel.

**Influence.** A contract publisher has the organisational muscle to negotiate economies of scale and better service.

**Development.** Societies that contract out their publishing can benefit from minimised risk and a breadth of experience in developing new and existing titles. Hancocks described the support the

*British Dental Journal* had received from its contract publisher Nature Publishing Group in developing *BDJ* to better meet its readers needs. "We used to include full research papers in our print edition, but our practitioner readers were too busy to filter and read them. We now build a story around each article – summarising the problem the researcher identified, the study they set up to investigate, the results they found, and what they plan to do next. This is much more accessible for readers, and they can choose to read the full article online once they have established an interest. Our contract publisher helped us with the market research that preceded this change and facilitated the development more quickly than we could have achieved by ourselves."

**In response to questions, Hancocks added:**

- removing the full text of articles from the print edition resulted in increased readership and (initially) increased ad revenues (the recession has since meant display advertising revenues are down – but by a smaller margin than elsewhere) (question from Becky Hall, *JBJS*, (Br))
- in developing new titles, market research showed a preference among readers for snappy, independent titles that did not incorporate 'BDJ'. It was felt that the *BDJ* brand was strong enough to support titles that were known to be associated with it (question from Tony Smith, *Journal of Dental Research*)
- in launching the *Vital* title for dental care practitioners (DCP), *BDJ* proposed partnership with a number of DCP organisations that were ultimately unwilling to take the risk of involvement. The title represents an initial *BDJ* foray into this market but does not directly compete with the activities of DCP organisations (question from Karin Bergqvist, Swedish Medical Association).

## Leveraging technology

Phil Caisley (Head of Information Services, BMJ Group) articulated some of the online publishing truisms with which publishers need to be familiar to maximise the reach of their content and to help define and build a flexible technical infrastructure to support these opportunities. "Every web page is a homepage"; users will link directly into any page on a publishers' website without necessarily navigating from the homepage through to the core content (60% of bmj.com's traffic is Google users being deep-linked to specific content pages). Publishers need to ensure that every page provides vital information about the organisation, and links to related content that will help make the site "sticky", i.e. keep users on the site. Collecting and analysing information about how users arrive at and move around a website can further help to optimise design and information architecture to create more stickiness.

Caisley continued by quoting Clay Shirky: "every web page is a community". Everyone visiting a particular web page has a shared interest in its content; therefore together they form the essence of a community. The publishing model is morphing from publications to content-related services that engage the community. "Know your users";

to segment and target users with personalised content and relevant offers, you need to capture information about their online behaviour, their demographics, their browser preferences and more. This information – gathered laterally across all touchpoints that your users have with your business - can be mined to inform analyses of market size, penetration and commercial opportunities.

Caisley then stepped backwards through the publishing process, from the delivery of articles on the web, to the creation and storage of the information assets from which 'publications' are created. "You don't know, when you start publishing, how you might want to repurpose your content downstream, so you need to manage content at the 'minimum reusable unit' level to support creation of new products as market opportunities arise." He recommended managing content at a granular level, storing it in appropriate and versatile repositories, and making it readily accessible to the various applications that need to source or use this data for varying delivery channels and business models. The objective should be for business (not technology) staff to be able to rapidly create new, targeted products from collections of granular assets.

## Developing new channels

Edward Briffa, Director, BMJ Learning, showcased some of the activities that BMJ has undertaken in this key area. In the medical market in particular, professional assessment is increasingly prevalent and tight (incoming revalidation requirements are expected to result in 10-15% of doctors requiring remedial training). In a market where distribution channels are becoming as critical as content, building services around these concerns and needs is a growth area. Briffa recommended reviewing the career map of your authors and readers to focus services around each phase, "but don't build it from scratch – you can outsource or partner." Business models are plentiful if, as yet, unproven – ranging from sponsorship, individual payment, institutional payment, advertising and straightforward event fees. A quick poll of delegates indicated that very few are active in continuing professional development (CPD).

### Delegate view

- Katy Jones, BASEM: "we discussed CPD opportunities in one of our sub-committees for three years, but concluded that the initial outlay – even for working with a partner – was too high a risk. CPD is popular with our members, but we have to balance meeting their needs with being answerable to them in terms of how we invest their dues."
- Henrietta Alderman, British Veterinary Association: "last year, we introduced CPD through video learning with our Vets TV channel. We are still exploring different business models and different directions. The pilot has established that our members do want information in this format; the challenge now is to develop it, with appropriate technology and funding, beyond video to incorporate the wider learning aspects as well."
- Stephen Hancocks, *BDJ*: "we include CPD questions in each issue and about 3,500 of our 20,000 members are now answering questions in each issue."
- John Cox, consultant: "textbooks and CPD are increasingly converging and using the same techniques and platforms – both textbook and CPD providers have to provide a complete package from learning through to assessment."

## Conclusion

The event concluded with an audience discussion about incorporating new technologies into publication websites. Jacob Rosenberg of *Ugeskrift / Danish Medical Bulletin* asked how society publishers can establish which web enhancements to invest in. Charlie Rapple of TBI Communications advised carrying out market research to see which tools and features may be of interest to members, applying the society staff's own experience to help predict which new features will be valued, and carrying out marketing campaigns to raise awareness and encourage usage of new functionality. It is worth trialling a range of services to assess their popularity, added Phil Caisley, and using analytics to assess usage. Give new services time to be adopted and used, and make sure you are keeping it simple and not overwhelming users with new features. Peter Ashman suggested some web enhancements which can be developed relatively cost-effectively (see "three website enhancement tips").

### Three website enhancement tips

- Search engine optimisation (SEO): a vital activity for maximising visibility of your content
- Optimising the user experience with related content links and highlights
- Simple, interesting podcasts and blogs that build on the content you publish with additional discussion or background