TRAINING JOURNAL PUBLISHERS

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Why train publishers?

Journals were published successfully for about three hundred years before anyone thought of providing formal training for their publishers. During this time the number of journals in the world increased fairly steadily and few suffered from declining numbers of subscribers. Most publishers up to the late 1950s and beyond saw journals as a service to scholarship rather than a profitable venture.

Since then, publishers have discovered that they can make money out of some journals, but not from all. They compete for the right to publish - and preferably own - those which are either now the most successful or which might become successful in the future. Proposals for new journals are carefully evaluated and tenders presented seriously.

Marketing is harder than it used to be; researchers may be persuaded that they need access to a particular journal, but be unable to get their library to release funds for it. New technology has changed, and is continuing to change, methods of production and subscription fulfilment; it is also changing the editorial offices of journals. Publishers want experience of electronic publishing - but not to go bankrupt in getting it.

Changes like this have underlined the need for training. This article looks at what journal publishers need to know and what training is currently available to them; the emphasis is on Europe and particularly the UK. It concentrates on the publishers rather than the editors of journals. Most journals are edited by academics or research workers who already have full-time jobs. They are likely to have experience of contributing to, and refereeing for, a number of journals and to have sat on editorial boards and to have little time to attend courses. So they train themselves and consult colleagues when they can. Membership of an appropriate association of editors can be helpful; these associations put out newsletters and hold workshops and conferences where problems can be aired.

What do journal publishers need to know?

Journal publishers must satisfy a number of constituents if they are to be successful, or be very lucky. Unless a journal is attractive to

authors and journal editors (who are usually academics or based in research institutions), little submitted to it will be worthy of publication. Publishers who do not understand their markets or the processes of turning accepted contributions into published issues (ie. editorial and production), run the risk of putting out unreadable journals, unappealing to both authors and readers, with delays in publication, or producing at too high a price. Lack of understanding of the needs of subscribers, both individual and institutional, and of subscription agents can lead to loss of subscribers and to high administrative costs.

Other things that a journal publisher should' master are copyright, which is becoming more complicated as electronic publishing opens up new possibilities, and contracts which need to balance the interests of publishers and the owners, sponsors and editors of the journals that they publish. They must know how to sell their journals and their publishing services. As with any business they must understand the financial aspects: journals that do not meet the targets of their owners (whether they be commercial publishers, university presses, learned societies, research institutions, public bodies, or not-for-profit or charitable organizations) may have short lives.

Supplying training

Publishing courses in colleges and universities are primarily concerned with trade publishing; very little time is spent on academic publishing and virtually none on journals. (That is also true of publishing courses in developing countries sponsored by the World Bank or the Overseas Development Administration - and I understand of courses in librarianship.) In any case, academic publishers prefer editors and managers to have some knowledge of the subjects in which they are publishing; publishers find it easier to teach publishing to graduate entrants than to provide specialist subject knowledge to people with a degree in publishing.

It therefore falls upon the employer to provide basic training so that those starting in journal publishing understand what journals are about and how they function. Those with more experience need continuing exposure to how the

world in which they operate is changing. Basic training may be provided by courses either in-house or outside. Continuing education comes from external courses, seminars, conferences and workshops, and, of course, from doing the job.

In-house training and external courses

On-the-job and in-house training is helpful in ensuring that people know the organisation's basic policies and practices and how their work relates to other departments. It is often needed when introducing new technology or working practices. It can be done at a time which is right for the trainer and for the trained, and the institution has control over the content. It can help managers and staff get to know each other better and may lead to discussions about whether present practice can be improved.

In-house training can sometimes be too narrow in scope and many bodies publishing journals have too few staff to make in-house training practicable. Outside trainers can make up for lack of in-house expertise and bring a wider view. In-house training will often reinforce current practice and the organisation's own view of its role and its customers. Questions may be inhibited since participants do not want to appear over-critical of their senior colleagues or to make fools of themselves in front of them.

External courses in journal publishing are relatively new. They have the advantage of taking participants away from their usual working environment and exposing them to a variety of speakers and their peers from other organisations. There is freedom to talk and to question without looking over one's shoulder: the course leaders do not report back to employers.

Most external courses are quite short, between one and four days; the organisers recognise that staff cannot be spared for long. Consequently they tend to be intensive. In the US, they may run over a weekend; in Europe, they often end on a Friday to give participants time to recover over the weekend and absorb what they have learnt.

Participants are encouraged to think about what they do and whether it is most appropriate now for the sort of journal that they publish. Speakers may include journal editors, librarians and subscription agents as well as publishers. As a course director I have been most impressed by

the number and range of speakers (many of them UKSG members) who have been willing to give excellent, well-prepared presentations on different aspects of journals.

Questions may be raised during the presentations as well as in question and answer sessions, often leading to lively debate. If the course runs over several days there will probably be a case study and perhaps a visit, to a library, indexing or abstracting service, document delivery centre or a subscription agent for instance. That provides relief of tension and helps participants see how journal publishers can look from the outside.

Case studies

Case studies are devised so as to cover a wide range of aspects of journal publishing. They are often based on real-life journals, heavily disguised. Preparing them is time-consuming, so they are frequently updated and reused. The question, how to turn the proposal one is given into a decent journal remains the same: the answers change over the years.

Examples include tendering for a society journal, persuading the society that you would be the best publisher for them, without promising the earth, losing your shirt, or charging much more than your competitors would. What can be done about a journal, started a few years ago, which has failed to perform as hoped? Another example concerns a proposal for a journal which might, or might not, work if followed without modification, but which could be taken in a number of different directions.

Working groups usually consist of between five and eight people as evenly balanced as possible by age, experience and type of job. Each group has to decide what they would do with the journal and what effect they expect their actions to have. There is often an opportunity to quiz the course leaders who may play different roles: editor, previous publisher, society officer other than editor and so on.

The emphasis is on group work. Everyone, not just the person in the group who works in marketing, should contribute to the publicity plan. Time is usually short, so participants have to absorb the paperwork and identify key issues speedily. The groups present their plans (usually

with a five-year budget) to the whole course. Lasting benefits come from discovering how much can be done in a short time; in learning that others do things differently; and making friends with whom one can discuss publishing questions in the years to come.

Course providers

The main provider of courses in journal publishing in the UK is Book House Training Centre (45 East Hill, London, SW18 2QZ). Their longest running courses are those on journal production and on the management of journals; both are annual, or more frequent, and last for several days. The management course is residential and involves case study work in the evenings. Book House also runs a one-day introductory course on journals and can organize in-house training.

STM (now the international Association of Scientific Technical and Medical publishers) ran the first course for middle management in Oxford in 1978. Since then STM has run three courses in the USA, two of them in association with the American Association of Publishers (AAP), and four in Europe; the ninth course is being held in Holland in May this year. AAP now run their own courses in the USA.

Conferences run by organizations concerned with serials, such as UKSG and NASIG; the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (UK) and the Society for Scholarly Publishing (US), and associations of publishers and editors throughout the world, provide continuing education, current awareness and meeting places for journal publishers. The UKSG has run some useful one day courses to show publishers what happens to journals in libraries.

On-the-job training and NVQs

National Vocational Qualifications are intended to demonstrate the holder's competence in any of a variety of tasks from bricklaying to lace-making. Two NVQs are concerned with journals. One on journal editing and production has four units covering the preparation of text, the processing of illustrations, proof-reading, and establishing effective working relationships. The other, on journal management and programme

development is more extensive. Topics include the monitoring and control of budgets; the control of quality in editing and production; creating and maintaining effective working relationships; working with editors, editorial boards and referees; and identifying and assessing markets for a journal.

With both, the candidate submits actual work (not necessarily recent) to an assessor to provide evidence of their ability to do the job. They can submit work for any number of units over as long a period as they choose. Some are more difficult to provide evidence for than others: identifying and minimizing interpersonal conflict may be a tricky subunit to achieve.

NVQs are relatively new. So far, few have taken up the challenge to get them in journal publishing. Technical editors may prefer the registration and accreditation scheme which the Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders is setting up. Some may be worried by questions of commercial confidentiality in relation to submissions for the journal management units. The success of NVQs is likely to depend upon employers' reactions. If they encourage their staff to take them, and prefer candidates for jobs to have them, then NVQs may prosper. Without that there is little incentive for anyone to submit work for them.

The cost of training

There are various elements of cost in training: course fees, accommodation and travelling are obvious. There is also the time lost to the employer, and, for speakers, the time spent preparing material. Whether in-house or external courses are cheaper will depend upon the numbers to be trained. But the sums of money are relatively small and most participants take back ideas for cost savings and improvements in

efficiency, so the payback period should be short. In other words: training pays.

The future

Trained publishers should have more understanding of what they should do and why they should do it. They should be aware of the consequences of their policies and practices and of what the alternatives are now, or might be in the future. But many journals are published by very small organisations who are difficult to reach, possibly having no full-time staff, and unaware of the advantages that training could bring.

The courses currently being offered are short and therefore their coverage is selective rather than comprehensive. Would it be possible to persuade publishers to release staff for a week to allow deeper coverage and discussion? Is there a market for courses on particular aspects of journal publishing other than production? If so, could one get speakers? People who will give an overview of a topic are naturally unwilling to reveal commercial secrets or those things which they believe give them an edge over their competitors.

By now, several hundred people have attended management courses in journal publishing, and others the introductory courses or those on production, so a good start has been made. But subscription agents and serials librarians may well be conscious of a gap between the training that is currently available and what all journal publishers would know in an ideal world. It is to be hoped that the gap between the need for and the take-up of training will narrow in the years to come.