

Desperately Seeking Website — E-Journals: The Cost of Convenience

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The role electronic journals play in rising subscription prices slipped into the agendas of several panels during the **Charleston Conference**. The assumption that the electronic journal would free up costs for publishers proved false in a society that desires digital displays without sacrificing the comfort of print. As a Society publisher, we have our own concerns regarding the fate of the print journal. The **American Society for Bone and Mineral Research** was established in 1977 and many of our current members have been with the **ASBMR** since that time. As you might expect, we have some members who prefer their print journal and it is as necessary for us to provide a print journal of superior quality as it is to furnish an electronic journal that meets the needs of those subscribers and members who are more technologically oriented. Our revenue is primarily subscription-based, and our member subscriptions make up the largest percentage of our subscription revenue. The loss of subscription revenue is a very real concern for a small Society publisher expected to provide the same quality in both print and online publications without raising membership or subscription rates that would make our Society unattractive to potential members or our publication expendable to someone administering a shrinking library budget.

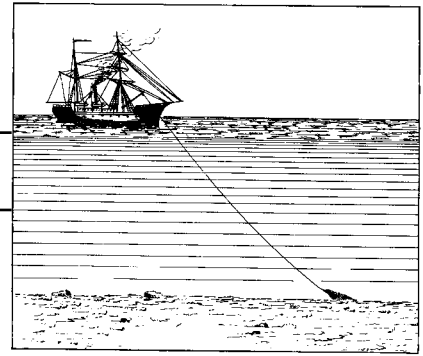
Print vs Electronic

The e-journal provides convenience and advantages for both customers and publishers; however, implementation of an online presence requires additional expenditures to the costs of producing a print publication. Twenty percent of our production costs are associated with producing the online journal. These are expenses incurred in SGML tagging of each article, producing PDF files and the archiving of these files. In addition are the expenses for Website design, set up and maintenance. The initial set up costs are a one-time expense but staff support will be a regular cost to us. Fixed costs such as staff, rent, supplies, computer support, and travel comprise the greatest per-

centage of expenses and these are constants even if producing only an electronic journal. Most scientific publications are peer-reviewed and that process must be supported whether it is done electronically or via paper with people and equipment. Advertising revenue is one way to cover these costs; however, the trend to embrace e-journals has not transferred to advertisers. Most advertisers are more satisfied with the results of a print ad than the number of hits generated by an online advertisement. Since this has not yet proven to be a viable alternative to print ads, we have to anticipate the need for print for some time. With the loss of subscription revenue hanging over our heads, we must measure our steps to determine an online business model that meets the needs of every subscriber and also strengthens our position as a leading journal in our field.

Lemonade Out of Lemons

How do we as publishers find the balance between dwindling print subscriptions and a growing demand for access to electronic content? Libraries have had to adapt to an environment of increasing rates and more dismal budgets, so shouldn't publishers have to evolve or die out? Libraries have banded together when faced with smaller budgets and a steady if not rising demand from patrons for information as quickly and conveniently as possible. By making the most of **Interlibrary Loan** procedures as well as utilizing their power in numbers as consortia, they've been able to make their money and influence go further. It is equally commendable that library associations have formed to address the needs of librarians in the sometimes hostile environment of scholarly publishing. During the **Charleston Conference**, I met librarians who designed their own sites to accommodate patrons, utilized faculty rather than surrendering to marketing schemes to determine new acquisitions when faced with shortages in both money and staff. Librarians have also led the push for archiving of digital content when no one was preparing a solution.



Should publishers take the road traveled by libraries and band together to reduce our risk and maximize our potential? Perhaps this isn't an option among competing publishers, but we can learn a lesson from our customers. Rather than cutting off our nose to spite our face by raising subscription prices to unreasonable rates, perhaps we can think more creatively to achieve the same goal. Once libraries began to act like the customers they have always been, they began to be empowered to engender change. The **ASBMR** has had to do the same essentially and recognize ourselves as customers as well. We have had to look more critically at the services for which we have been paying to determine where we have been duplicating costs and where we can save by taking our business elsewhere. Just as a library cannot afford to retain a publication that is no longer a resource for its patrons, neither should publishers retain all the services that we currently contract simply because things have always been done that way. If there are activities that can be done in-house or through less expensive means certainly an effort should be made in that direction. Once you've pared down the expenses as far as possible without sacrificing publishing quality or customer service (which is also what we do as a member-directed scientific society), then you have to think of something else. Surely, it is not too late for us to learn from our customers' example. After taking in the wealth of information at the conference, and listening to remarks by speakers as well as participants, I must admit that we certainly do have our work cut out for us. 🌳