

Evaluating the Operations and Performance of a Journal: 46 Questions to Ask

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“How do we increase sales and income for our journal?”

Most association professionals will look only at marketing and promotion activities for answers. They fail to realize that sales and income are the results of a total journal publishing effort. A detailed marketing plan and timely promotion are only part of increasing journal subscriptions and licensing revenue.

Journal publishing is considered to be a staid operation, taken for granted by the sponsoring organization as a steady and dependable income producer. In many scholarly and scientific organizations, journals are ignored and put on automatic pilot, resulting in a scenario that goes something like this: Editor selects articles, production cycle is completed, and the journal is published and then distributed to members and subscribers. Is this status quo approach to journal publishing smart from a business standpoint? Is this smart from a product management standpoint?

Many organizations assume their non-staff journal editor—usually an academic or scientist—can do the required job of editing the journal without any oversight. But an academic or scientist will not think like a publishing executive. For example, as a publishing executive you should be asking questions about margins, growth, renewal rates, co-publishing opportunities, licensing, and overall operational improvement.

To maintain optimal editorial and sales performance, it is critical to periodically review and evaluate your journal's operations. Even better, think of the journal as a start-up and ask questions. What questions should be asked? What are the vital areas to be reviewed and who is responsible for them in a journal start up?

Following are some of the questions from my *McHugh Publishing Management Audit* that deal specifically with scholarly and scientific journals.

Editorial

1. Who is the audience for your journal? Why do they read it?
2. When was the last time you reviewed your mission statement for your journal? Revised it?
3. When was your last reader survey? What did you learn?
4. Do you publish special issues?
5. How many manuscripts (completed issues) are in your editorial pipeline?
6. Why do authors publish in your journal?
7. What are benefits of being published in your journal?
8. Have you ever surveyed the customer satisfaction level of your contributors? If “yes,” what did you learn?
9. What other journals do you compete with for authors and readers?
10. Do you have a position description for your editor? A contract? Do you pay a stipend?
11. What is the term of appointment for your editor?
12. What is the process to review and select your editor?
13. Do you have a position description for your editorial board members?
14. When was the last time you reviewed or revised your manuscript submission requirements?
15. Does the editorial board meet on a regular basis? Do the members provide timely and effective information to help guide the journal?

Electronic Publishing

16. What system do you use to manage peer review?
17. What system do you use to manage redaction and production?
18. Do you structurally tag manuscript files (e.g., XML, SGML) to more easily repurpose content?
19. Do you archive your electronic files in-house?
20. Do you offer an electronic version of your journal at your Web site?
21. What is the definitive source file for your published articles—print or electronic?
22. Do you offer access to article metadata (e.g., bibliographic citations and abstracts) on your Web site?

Ancillary Income

23. What are the annual sales of article reprints?
24. How much licensing income is generated by the journal?
25. What is your strategy to maximize licensing income?
26. Have you produced any anthologies of past journal articles?

Marketing/Promotion

27. What abstracting and indexing (A&I) services list your journal?
28. Do you know which A & I's are critical to your journal's success?
29. What on-going publicity do you have for your journal?
30. What journals compete with your journal?

31. What are your journal's unique features?
32. How often and how do you promote your journal to librarians?
33. Does your organization have a library advisory committee?

Circulation/ Subscriptions/Production

34. What percentage of sales is to: Individual Subscribers? Institutions? Subscription Agents?
35. What has been the trend in paid subscriptions over the last three years?
36. What is your renewal rate?
37. Can you handle electronic subscriptions?
38. When was the last time you reviewed your printing contract?

Performance Measures

39. How many manuscripts does your editor receive annually?
40. What is the reviewing cycle time from submission to acceptance or rejection?
41. What is the acceptance/rejection ratio for manuscripts?
42. How many accepted articles are in the editorial pipeline?
43. What is the number of pages printed annually?
44. How many paid subscriptions do you have?
45. How many issues have you mailed?
46. What is your on-time publication performance?

The answers to these questions will help to improve the performance of your journal. When working with a client, these are some of the questions I ask in a *McHugh Publishing Management Audit* of a journal program. If you have an interest in discussing the *McHugh Publishing Management Audit*, please call 414-351-3056 or email jack@johnbmchugh.com

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