

# Strategies for Small Journal Development

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It is an interesting time in scientific publishing. The long standing balance between supply and demand is changing rapidly as is the very nature of the product being supplied.

The supply of scientific communications is increasing as commercial publishers enter niches occupied by society journals, while societies create journals for new specialties and fragment portions of old ones. New products include desk-top newsletters, preprints, electronic bulletin boards, electronic publishing, and the ever-increasing government gray literature.

The demand for traditional journals is decreasing as alternative communication products increase. Scientists read ever more narrowly, and personal and institutional finances constrain subscription inventories. Scientists and librarians come to rely on narrowly focused computerized searches, and most graduate students not only fail to scan journals in their field but also fail to recognize this as an acceptable activity.

In this environment, one of the more vulnerable sorts of journals is that sponsored by the small scientific society. Although these journals have a market advantage because of their subsidies and captive subscribers, they suffer a market disadvantage because their fixed costs are spread over few members, they are highly specialized, and they run on volunteer help. In this article, I consider experiences with a small society journal and its sponsoring society to offer insight into strategies to support their survival.

## The Society

The society sponsoring this journal developed along what in retrospect is a common path. In the 1970s, funding became available to study aquatic birds that tend to nest together on beaches or islands. (These are gulls, terns, herons, storks, pelicans, and various seabirds.) The name "colonial waterbirds" was coined and a self-defined interest area emerged. Research activity resulted in a symposium, held in 1976, that begot the Colonial Waterbird Group, which met a year later (1). After a decade, the name was formalized to the "Colonial Waterbird Society," a small, specialized association that serves about 475 members and subscribers and self-consciously looks forward to its twentieth anniversary.

## The Journal

The society's journal also developed along what seems to be a traditional path. The proceedings of the founding

symposium were published as an edited book. After the first society meeting, the presented papers were collected and published in typescript. In 1981, the Proceedings became a refereed journal, *Colonial Waterbirds*, the first issue of which was assigned to Volume 4. It was an annual until 1985 when it became semiannual. Its quarterly publication has been approved but not implemented. In 1992 the journal, now in its 15th volume, published 166 pages in two numbers.

The development of a stand-alone journal was not an explicit intention of the society's founders, most of whom hoped to preserve the informal, interest-group character of the association. Once begun, the process was inexorable. To attract professional contributors, the journal had to be refereed. Because the values of peer reviewers are consistent across ornithological journals, national standards were adopted *de facto*. The role of informal communication was taken over by a society newsletter.

Development of this new journal occurred despite there being neither a lack of ornithology journals nor a lack of space to publish quality articles in the field. The journal from the beginning entered a highly competitive market competing for quality articles with a dozen or more national bird journals as well as powerful disciplinary journals.

## The Strategy

In the early 1980s the journal faced challenges in the niche it coveted. These included heavy competition for articles from more prestigious journals sponsored by societies with which it overlapped completely in membership; a relatively small (low hundreds) subscriber base; a specialized and artificially constructed interest field; a flat rate of entrance into the field in North America; and a general trend of decreasing journal subscriptions. In response, the Society developed an explicit strategy that was implemented by successive journal editors.

**Expanding Society Membership.** The financial health of the small society journal depends fundamentally on the number of society memberships. Attracting and retaining members is especially important in small organizations because of the disproportionate financial implications. Goals of membership recruitment include stabilizing the society, increasing the communications network in the field, and, most importantly for this discussion, maintaining journal funding.

Additional professional and institutional memberships were sought continually by committees and editors. Students were solicited as members and were well cared for at the annual meetings, taking advantage of the small-society opportunity for prominent senior individuals to spend time with students. Efforts were made to increase membership from under-represented disciplinary groups. Discussions were undertaken to encourage a North American seabird biologist association to co-adopt the journal. Although not always successful, the efforts demonstrated the journal's interest is in service to this community.



International membership was also encouraged. Canadian colleagues were welcomed particularly and have now served in all offices including president. A recent journal editor was from Canada, which was a conscious decision to solidify the journal's position among scientists there. A society meeting was held in Puerto Rico and another is scheduled for Europe. Europeans are being added to the Society leadership, and international participation is increasing.

**Increasing Journal-Generated Income.** The dues structure of a small society must remain modest because potential members choose annually among competing membership opportunities. To release dues for activities other than the journal, additional sources of income are needed. The journal itself can be a source of revenue.

Advertisements were solicited from firms doing business with ornithologists. Page charges were instituted that now cover about half the cost of an issue. The journal was opened to sponsored symposia, which provided funds for entire issues. As a result, the society was able to build a comfortable reserve and was financially able to begin quarterly publications.

**Increasing Access.** Potential contributors must be assured that their communication will be accessible to the intended readership, which in all cases extends beyond the confines of society membership. A basic strategy element was to increase access to the journal.

Negotiations were undertaken with the major abstracting organizations, and free subscriptions were provided. Most critical was to include the journal in *Current Contents*, an important requisite for an author selecting a journal for publication. ISI rules are strict and the society was called upon to show a commitment to the journal's continued publication, especially demonstrating a history of on-time publication. Meeting this expectation forced an increased professionalism on the editorial process.

A campaign was started to increase the number of library subscriptions. Although all journals attend to library subscriptions for cash flow purposes, the strategy here was primarily one of increasing access. A subscription drive began among members' institutions, and important libraries were given free introductory subscriptions and sets of back issues to secure shelf space.

The journal was continually brought to the attention of the professional community by means of newsletters and advertisements taken out or traded with other journals and by displays at other meetings. Changes in editorships and special editions of the journal were exploited for publicity in newsletters. These activities gradually increased the awareness of the journal among nonsociety professionals, which in turn increased its desirability to potential authors.

Access was also enhanced by subtle changes in format. Printing, reprints, style, and format were brought up to the expected national standards. To increase the comfort level of the reader, the journal adopted style conventions of the most prominent journal in the broad disciplinary area of its members. Key words, abstract, and a complete bibliographic

citation were added to the first page of each article so readers could access required information easily. The table of contents was moved to the cover, so it would be inviting to anyone who happened to pick up a copy. A nuance was to resist allowing the journal name to be abbreviated: each citation carried its full, recognizable name.

**Expanding Content.** One mechanism for increasing the reception of a journal is to expand its contents in form and substance. This must be done carefully so as to preserve the historical context of the journal and to meet the expectations of the members that sponsor it.

The under-represented seabird community was especially targeted with invitations to submit papers. The success of this tactic can be seen in a comparison of three three-year blocks (1983-85, 1986-88, 1989-91). (These blocks, respectively, cover the first three editorships after the journal became refereed; the second block represents my own editorship.) From 1983-85 to 1989-91, the number of seabird papers tripled to 32% of the total number of contributions.

The types of contributions were expanded to include notes (short communications), commentaries, book reviews, invited review papers, and editorials. As a result, the average number of notes doubled (2). For each issue, a prominent figure was asked to comment on emerging or historical aspects of the discipline. This produced commentaries that sparked considerable interest among the readership. A book-review editor was appointed to concentrate on soliciting reviews, again especially from prominent workers in the field. As a result, commentaries and reviews increased from none in the first three years, to eight and six per year in the latter two periods. One commissioned paper was a definitive review of conservation issues that resulted in a 40-page contribution by 11 co-authors. Unsolicited commentaries on published papers with responses from authors were encouraged, allowing readers to take on provocative topics.

Another source of contributions was the opening of the journal to symposia. The financial advantage was noted, but it is even more important to consider the intellectual contributions of symposia. These increased the number of important articles published.

Aided by these strategies, the journal increased its total output (2). In the three-year blocks, the average number of papers per year increased from 26 to 43, then declined to 33. The number of pages published increased from 190 yearly to 288, followed by a decline to 200.

**Recruiting Authors.** Active correspondence was initiated with potential authors. Members were reminded to submit. Other journals were perused, and authors of articles related to the focus of the journal were solicited. The invited commentaries and reviews provided a mechanism to enlist the participation of leaders in various fields.

In recruiting potential authors, seabird biologists and international authors especially were sought. To ease the submission process, a board of associate editors was appointed that consisted of representatives from each conti-



ment and from the ranks of seabird biologists. The submission process was changed to allow an international author to submit directly to the nearby associate editor who had the contribution refereed locally.

In soliciting international papers, an important editorial decision was necessary. In a field discipline, it is not reasonable to exact the same standards for contributions from developing countries as for those from North America. Of course, the technical aspects of a study need to meet standards, but the stage of the science differs in various places. It became critical to judge the content and value of an article on the basis of regional expectations rather than on those for a well-studied area such as North America. Second-language abstracts were encouraged from international authors.

The result of the effort to recruit international papers was encouraging (2). The percentage of non-USA authors increased to 47% over the three comparison periods. The number of countries represented increased from 4 to 14.

**User-Friendly Editing.** A staid, well-established publication can have the luxury of a staid and unfriendly editorial process. A small society journal cannot. A strategy was followed that made the editor a facilitator of publication.

Experience shows that most papers submitted to small journals are basically publishable in that they make a contribution and are based on studies performed properly. However, most papers are not composed well enough to escape revision. This is when the editorial system has to be proactive with an overriding goal of assisting all potential authors towards success. When a paper really was fatally flawed or inappropriate to the journal, this was communicated as compassionately as possible.

Referees were selected carefully for their helpfulness to authors. Small society journals often serve as the initial publication outlets for new professionals, and these should be especially mentored. Editors and referees took special care in helping to turn theses into papers. Rewriting suggestions were also important for foreign authors, many of whom have limited experience in writing English. It is not helpful just to demand rewrites. Rather, someone must take the initiative to recommend specific changes. Such a courtesy can pay large dividends in international paper flow.

Decreasing turn-around time is one of the greatest user-friendly acts. Short publication times make the journal especially attractive. Advantages of a small journal are that manuscripts can be attended to promptly and published quickly. One requirement was to begin with semiannual publication and move as quickly as possible to quarterly. For potential authors who need rapid publication for scientific or career purposes, a turn-around time from submission to publication of less than nine months makes a journal highly competitive.

User friendliness includes having clear instructions and communicating them in an encouraging way. In this manner, the journal becomes a companion in building a research

career rather than an impediment. Young scientists nurtured in this fashion continue to contribute after they are established in their field.

**Increasing Journal Importance.** How do you increase the real and perceived importance of a developing journal? A journal is not important; the articles it publishes are. So one increases the importance of a journal by publishing important articles.

One productive approach was to recruit recognized scientists as authors of papers, commentaries, editorials, and reviews. Quality contributors generally produce contributions that give the readership access to the best minds in the field. By carefully soliciting authors and topics, the journal can take a proactive role in the evolution of the discipline itself.

Specific tactics to enhance quality included impaneling *ad hoc* committees to produce white papers on critical topics of importance to the readership, soliciting review articles on specific topics, and taking chances on new ideas espoused in commentaries. A specific call was made to increase the level of speculation in articles and commentaries in order to challenge the field with new ideas (2). In part, this action was a return to the original purpose of the society, to stimulate research not just report it. The quality of articles and the journal's reputation was also enhanced by recruiting prominent scientists as referees. Their participation in the growth and development of the journal held mutual rewards. Quality peer review results in quality articles.

Quality articles cited by others bring attention to the journal. This is a self-building process; increased quality of articles leads to increased citations which lead to increased prestige which leads to increased quality of articles.

## Why Bother?

A strategy for the care and feeding of a developing journal must have a fundamental rationale. The activities discussed here may seem a bit calculating and self serving. So we must not overlook the reason why so much time and effort can be enlisted to support such a journal. The small society journal provides opportunities for publishing specialized contributions that might be harder to publish elsewhere. The goal is to build the knowledge base of the field and to encourage the progress in the disciplines supported by the journal. Having a viable, focused, vigorous, interacting journal is one way to assure this progress.

This has certainly been so in the present case history. I have had the opportunity over the past decade of writing two monographs on the birds covered by the journal (3,4). I can testify that because of the journal, a critical mass of information was made available concerning these species that would not have been published if this journal did not exist. In fact, it is unlikely that the knowledge base of the groups could have supported a critical monographic treatment if it had not been for the journal.

This journal is undeniably valuable in the field, and it remains an important vehicle to guide and communicate

work in these bird groups worldwide. With the society approaching its twentieth anniversary and increasing its international perspective, the future looks bright for this small society and its journal, indeed perhaps because of its journal.

#### References

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