
Essays

Role of the consultant in journal publishing

Deborah Dixon

Dixon Consulting Services Ltd; Editorial Director for the Global Medical and Sciences Journals, Oxford University Press
deborah@dixonconsultingservices.org

DOI: 10.20316/ESE.2016.42.011

Abstract: Consultants use their extensive experience to help learned societies, publishers, and industries with their publishing strategies. Their intermediary role enables review of contractual arrangements and processes to optimise financial returns, performance, and efficiencies. They apply cutting-edge knowledge to the bespoke needs of clients, and they can stimulate a growth agenda for societies and publishers. They can often get things done faster and with more expertise than in-house staff and play an important part in the rapidly changing publishing landscape.

Keywords: journals, publishing, consultant, strategy

In journal publishing there are at least three types of clients who engage consultants.

1. *Learned societies.* Many of the highest impact journals are owned by learned societies. The largest societies often self-publish, but the majority partner with a publishing company to publish and disseminate their journals.
2. *Publishing companies.* I have experienced first hand the difficulties that publishing companies have resourcing projects that entail exploring new business opportunities, improving processes, and managing change.
3. *Industries.* Both large companies such as pharmaceutical companies, that have publication needs around their products, and new entrants that are looking to license content and build new products in the digital information space.

In addition, official representative publishing bodies such as STM¹ and Association of Learned and Professional Publishers², and market research organisations such as Outsell³ also engage consultants to do market research and write reports.

All of these types of client have the ultimate aim of growing their businesses and profits in a challenging environment for growth. One important aspect of the consultant's role is to help clients with a growth strategy that can involve anything from optimising their current arrangements and reducing costs, to expansion plans into adjacent business areas.

Society-Publisher partnerships

Income from journals is essential to many learned societies; for some it is their only source of financing. For those societies that partner with a publisher it is vital that the relationship works well and that the rewards are optimal.

Most journal publishing contracts are for five years, so societies review every three or four years whether they wish

to continue with their current partner or seek proposals from other publishers. Self-publishing societies also review their own arrangements from time to time in an increasingly tough sales environment for smaller societies who go it alone.

Many societies will contract a consultant to help them with reviewing their publishing arrangements, preparing RFPs (requests for proposals), evaluating responses from publishers and arranging shortlisting, presentations, and selection of preferred partners. Further contractual negotiations with the publisher are often conducted by consultants in liaison with societies' officers.

It is important that societies have excellent partnerships with their publishers that deliver maximum financial returns, but it is also vital that the relationship meets the needs of the journals' editors, authors, and the communities they serve. Boosting the impact of the journal compared with competing journals and attracting maximum global market share of important research articles is also of great importance in the current landscape. The consultant will understand all these needs, from the perspectives of the society and the publisher, and be able to balance the financial negotiations so that the society has maximum return for a service from the publisher that delivers on these needs. This results in a contract that sets the scene for a transparent and productive publishing relationship.

Publishing strategy

Consultants can be extremely valuable in helping publishers and learned societies build and crystallise their publishing strategies. Tools such as scenario planning exercises, where small groups envision possible futures in publishing and measure the robustness of various strategies for each possible future, can get clients to focus on the changes taking place in the information world, how they may affect them, and what they should do to mitigate risk and capitalise on new opportunities.

Open access in particular exercises the minds of the traditional subscription publishers and is also a potential threat to the revenues societies derive from their journals. The ethical arguments for open access are strong. It is difficult, for example, to dispute the value of making scientific results available to all so they can save time and avoid duplication in their own research. Often, though, there is a conflict because authors and editors believe in maximising access to their content whereas publishers and societies do the maths and worry that their futures are not sustainable under open access models. Consultants can work with societies and publishers to formulate open access strategies that work for

authors and for journal owners. The answer is often a mix of hybrid options in subscription models and launching new publications under a gold open access model that fill a niche and help a publisher or society to gain worthwhile market share of articles as the number of papers published continues to grow fast year on year.

Technology plays an extremely important part in planning the future of publications. Journals need to be published first and foremost on reliable, robust platforms. It is the consultant's job to do the due diligence on publishing platforms and understand the strengths and weaknesses of the various offerings (eg Highwire's partnership approach vs. the proprietary platforms of the big publishers like Elsevier and Wiley). Also important is the work that the publisher or technology provider does to the content to make it discoverable and rank highly in Google searches. Increasingly, individual article metrics are important to authors for showing the impact of their work to their funders, so publishers need to be able to supply them with the information they need. Consultants need to be experts on the status quo but also aware of emerging trends in electronic publishing, and which are likely to stay in journal publishing. Indeed, consultants can have an additional role here in advising technology companies on the features most needed by the research communities.

Portfolio expansion

Societies interested in investing their surplus funds in expansion of their publishing portfolios often engage consultants to help them with business plans and implementation. Rather than standing still with their publishing businesses many societies own strong enough brands that, if extended in ways that preserve or enhance the brand's value, can create additional revenues and boost impact in their scientific communities. It is tough to launch successful subscription journals with today's licensing models, but some societies have successfully launched new open access journals (for example, the *Journal of the American Heart Association*; and *EMBO Molecular Medicine*). Educational products such as online learning have also proved successful when driven by learned societies (such as the Endocrine Society's CME, *BJUI Knowledge*, and the American Society of Anesthesiologist's CM). Consultants can provide the data and market knowledge required for societies to make good business decisions and can also work with in-house teams to set up the processes involved in implementation.

Publishers often employ consultants to research new business opportunities, such as expansion into new markets, and development of new products. They may also employ consultants to oversee publishing operations at times of structural change or shortage of resource.

Increasing efficiencies

Reviews of editorial and production processes can be carried out by consultants with the aim of recommending changes to streamline the processes, while maintaining quality. Consultants can act as independent observers and,

through understanding the needs of editors and publishers, can remedy many breakdowns in communication between the two which, in extreme cases, can ruin relationships between the publisher and society.

Industry needs

Industries also have publishing needs, often to disseminate good, evidence-based news about their products. Consultants can be helpful to industries such as the pharmaceutical industry in acting as intermediaries in relationships with societies. Consultants are able to ensure that the needs of both parties are met. For the society the benefits can be sponsorship for new products and services that the society is unable to fund itself. For industry the society provides publishing vehicles such as journals for their research output and also opportunities to work with key opinion leaders on educational ventures such as online learning. Consultants can make the right connections, generate ideas, and also ensure that there are clear and transparent guidelines for any associations to avoid any conflicts of interest.

Ethos and attitude

Consultants need to have a very strong ethical code. The knowledge they gain about their clients must be kept strictly confidential. The work they do should benefit the client only, and they should never accept projects that create conflicts of interest. Their advice and recommendations they make should be based on evidence as far as possible, and they should point out any risks.

Consultants are sometimes accused of being heavy handed, egotistical. In reality the best consultants are those who listen carefully to their clients' needs and are so well informed that they give state of the art, relevant advice⁴.

Setting up as a publishing consultant

After working with consultants for many years, I had a good idea of what sort of work they did and for whom. I spoke with some of them, sounding out my idea of setting up a consultancy business, and was met with unanimous enthusiasm. Publishing professionals who have gone down this route and made a success of it love the work. It is varied, high level, and you can do much of it from a home office.

If you are thinking of setting up as a publishing consultant there are a number of things to think about. Firstly, do you want to set up a limited company or work as a freelancer or sole trader? I opted to set up a limited company because I wanted to be able to pay other freelancers to work on projects with me. There is more administrative work involved with a limited company, and many consultants do not feel the need to go down this route and can function perfectly well as sole traders.

You will need to make information available about your services. I set up a simple website: dixonconsultingservices.org. This is easy to do with the fantastic software available, such as Wix, you can download for free⁵. In the UK if you set up a company you need to register the company name with Companies House⁶ (UK) and you also need to buy your domain name for the website from one of many independent

companies that will handle this for you for a small fee.

My own personal aim is to gain TOMA (top-of-mind awareness) among potential clients⁷. This means that you are the first “brand” that comes to mind when a potential client is asked “who will you approach about consultancy for your publishing?” This requires building a fantastic reputation by doing a great job of every project you take on. It is this word-of-mouth method that brings the business. I take inspiration from the McKinsey approach. Consultants have a huge role in facilitating innovation, creating value in the journals publishing business, and stimulating some of that much needed growth.

References

- 1 International Association of STM Publishers (STM). Available at: www.stm-assoc.org
- 2 Association of Learned and Professional Publishers (ALPSP). Available at: [/www.alpssp.org](http://www.alpssp.org)
- 3 Outsell Inc. Available at: www.outsellinc.com
- 4 Kakabadse NK, Louchart E, Kakabadse A. Consultant's role: a qualitative inquiry from the consultant's perspective. *Journal of Management Development*. 2006; 25(5):416 – 500.
- 5 Wix.com Free Website Builder. Available at: www.wix.com/freesitebuilder
- 6 Gov.uk. Companies House. www.gov.uk/government/organisations/companies-house
- 7 Hakala U, Svensson J, Vincze Z. Consumer-based brand equity and top-of-mind awareness: A cross-country analysis. *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 2012; 21(6): 439-451. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/10610421211264928>

Poster award winners at EASE conference in Strasbourg 2016

The conference featured a tremendous selection of posters on the topic of ethical medical editing, which provoked spirited discussion among attendees. *The Lancet* award for best medical poster was awarded to Abdolreza Norouzy for his group's abstract *Exploring the attitude of medical faculty members in Iran towards research misconduct*. Second prize was awarded to Shelly Pranic for *Use of medical terminologies to describe adverse event terms in clinical trials*. Valerie Matarese won the *Annals of Botany* award for best non-medical poster for her abstract, *Supporting research writing in non-anglophone contexts: role of language professionals*.



Abdolreza Norouzy receiving one of *The Lancet* prizes from Joan Marsh



Valerie Matarese being awarded the *Annals of Botany* prize by Rod Hunt