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Supporting Society Journals

During the past several years many scientific societies have been experiencing financial strains that have threatened their publication programs and limited their ability to engage in other desirable activities. Soaring prices of paper and other inflation have raised costs sharply and forced a search for additional income. The principal sources of revenue are members' dues, subscriptions, page charges, and advertising. Increases in members' dues are not popular and are a burden to students. Libraries have been hit hard by increases in subscription rates and are cutting back on the number of periodicals. Some, but probably not a majority, of the publications have page charges. This source of revenue brings complex problems which become more severe as costs per page increase. Advertising is the one source of revenue for major publications that might be increased without trauma to scientists. However, the wholehearted cooperation of their readers is essential if more advertising dollars are to be channeled to publications of scientific societies.

Today there is a substantial market for sales of laboratory equipment and supplies. Hundreds of millions of dollars are involved. To reach this market suppliers spend large sums for advertising. A minor fraction of the total goes to journals published by scientific societies, but most of it goes to the organizations that publish the free, controlled circulation (throwaway) tabloids and magazines.

The journals published by scientific and other professional societies differ from typical commercial publications in a number of ways. The basic objective of the society publications is to provide readers with information relevant to their scholarly discipline, while that of commercial publications is to make a profit. In general, the editorial content of the society journals meets the very high intellectual standards of the scholars in the disciplines which they cover. In contrast, the editorial content of commercial and business or trade publications is usually determined by the editorial staff without recourse to outside experts. The staff must necessarily give thought to business considerations if profit is to be made. Trivial, intellectually mediocre stories often get into print. Other things being equal, incremental revenue is expected to flow through to profit. Some business and trade publications include considerable editorial content consisting of advertisers' new product releases, which may or may not be rewritten to conform to editorial style. Some publications have no editorial content except product releases. Others consist only of ads. With only a few exceptions, the throwaways are money-eating parasites feeding on the scientific enterprise.

In the competition for advertising, the peer review journals operate under severe handicaps. Advertisers cannot dictate editorial content. They resent the practice of grouping ads at the front and the back of scholarly journals. Since advertisers generally cannot understand the technical content of scholarly journals, they consider them dull. This impression is heightened by more frequent use of expensive graphics in the throwaways.

In spite of these handicaps, some of the scholarly journals compete for advertising and with the cooperation of scientists could compete much more successfully. The key to the situation is the readers' service cards. In making decisions with respect to continued placement of advertising in a periodical, advertisers are guided by the volume of inquiries that their previous ads have elicited. Most of these inquiries come in the form of filled-out readers' service cards which are keyed so that the periodical source is identifiable. Readers of society journals that have such cards can help their organization by being selective in their use of readers' service cards. Sustained cooperation could eventually result in the diversion of millions of dollars to journals of the professional societies.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON and ROBERT V. ORMES