How to do it

Improve a student journal

COLIN M BARRON

British Medical Journal, 1979, 1, 669-670

I was always interested in magazines. At the age of 7, I produced my first—a 14-page collection of jokes, drawings, and stories entitled *The Weekly World*, and, later, I hand-produced a number of comic magazines for my own amusement. It was quite natural, therefore, that I should become interested in student publications. After a spell as a writer/cartoonist for Glasgow University *Guardian*, I joined the production team of *Surgo* (Glasgow University Medical Journal) in 1975—first as a cartoonist, later as advertisement manager, and finally as editor.

During the last year or so, we have improved the production standards of *Surgo* considerably by applying a number of principles. These principles are not the sort that you will find in textbooks but, instead, are derived from years of success and failure. I hope they may be of value to others.

Key principles

Let's start at the beginning. You're the editor of a student magazine which looks like half-a-dozen sheets of lavatory paper stapled together; the layout is abysmal; the articles are boring; and no one will advertise in it. Worse still, no one reads it. Just how do you start improving it? The first key principle is enthusiasm, optimism, and a genuine desire for improvement. If you do not enjoy being editor and do not want to make every issue better than the last, then you are in the wrong job.

The next important principle is to have a working knowledge of printing. You don't have to write a 3000-word dissertation on the merits of offset litho to be a student editor, but you do need to know the basics of the subject because an editor who knows nothing about printing is like a surgeon who knows nothing about anatomy. A good introductory text is *The Ladybird Book of Printing* (seriously), and most public libraries stock a few advanced books on the subject.

Production team

Having worked up some enthusiasm for the job, you should then assemble your production team. Ideally, this should consist of several experts, each skilled in one particular subject. At the very least you will need an advertisement manager and a finance manager. If you intend to have much artwork in your magazine, you would be advised to have a couple of resident artists plus a photographer. If you do not have any design sense yourself, one of the artists should serve as layout man and art editor.

It is also useful to include in your production team some interested people who can serve as general dogsbodies—writing book reviews and snippets, for example, making coffee and, most important, coming up with ideas.

Once you have assembled your production team, encourage them all to contribute to the magazine in some way. It is wrong, I've found, to be *too* democratic—in the end the editor must have the final say because an unchecked committee will spend hours arguing about what colour of staples to use.

Layout and design

A common failing of student magazines is layout and design. Student editors are often content to present articles as page after page of unbroken type. In fact, the most interesting article in the world becomes unreadable when presented in this way, so, if you want people to read your magazine, learn about layout.

Unfortunately, few books have been written about this and much of the craft seems to have been passed down by word of mouth, but you can learn by studying professional magazines. The next time you're browsing through *TV Times*, stop and look. Observe the way that text, illustrations, headings, and white space have been blended together to produce a page that is attractive, eye-catching, and easy to read. It is worth while building up a collection of professional magazines with good layout, for occasional reference. If you are really stuck for a way to lay out a particular article then go ahead and copy the layout from a professional magazine, inch for inch. Articles may be copyright but layouts aren't.

One of the basic principles of layout is that the text should be broken up into small, easy-to-read blocks. There are several ways of doing this. The simplest is using subheadings in bold type surrounded by the correct proportion of white space. As it is rather unlikely that the author's original subheadings will occur in the most aesthetically pleasing part of the page, you may have to move the heading. More commonly, you will have to write headings that didn't exist in the manuscript—whatever you do, however, don't waste the design value of a subheading by leaving it sitting at the top of a column.

Drawings and illustrations

Almost every article looks better with some sort of illustration and you should remember that it is usually the picture that makes people stop at a particular page. If you use drawings, they should be done in pen and indian ink—not a ballpoint pen or felt-tip because this looks unprofessional. A Rotring-type indian ink drawing instrument is a good investment at £2 or £3, while half-tone areas can be effected with self-adhesive dots such as Letratone. Drawings look better if produced larger than required and then scaled down to size.

A two-column format is reckoned to be easiest to read, but if you use a lot of illustrations three (or more) columns allow for a more flexible layout.

Advertisement manager

The advertisement manager is the unsung hero of the production team—without his efforts, the whole show would not be possible. Regrettably, however, it is not a popular job and this is because people imagine that it involves many hours of letter writing, often with little result. But the job can be rewarding and fruitful, and drudgery can be kept to a minimum if the right techniques are used. Letter writing can be dispensed with for selling advertising space, and the telephone used instead. The telephone is the most efficient way of selling advertising space—in our experience it has a success rate of over 50% as compared to 10% for letters.

When you are on the phone, try to put yourself in the shoes of the man on the other end of the line. What information would convince him that it would be a good idea to take an ad? The readership, for example. If a few copies of your magazine lie about hospital reading rooms then you would be justified in saying that your magazine is “widely read by doctors.”

You should always try to present your magazine as favourably as possible, even if you do have to exaggerate somewhat, and if your magazine is still of poor quality then you should try to avoid showing a copy—you can do this if you sell space by phone. Advertisers are more interested in taking space if their product is in some way connected with features in the magazine. If you have a motoring section, for example, dealers will probably be delighted to take ads if you ask them to supply road-test cars. If there's an annual ball coming up soon, try to get a clothes-hire service to advertise, and if you've got a book review section you should have little difficulty in attracting medical publishers.

The main complaint of student editors is that no one will write articles. There are several ways of getting round this problem. First of all, get as many regular features as possible. If someone writes a particularly good piece for one issue, make it into a regular feature. Regular features, once established, almost seem to write themselves and the editor need only send timely reminders as the copy date approaches. These regular features should be put on the same page in each issue to make them easier to find. If you're trying to get anyone to write for your magazine it is best to give them a subject or a title—a man who is asked to write about anything usually ends up writing about nothing.

Another problem is contributors who do not produce their articles on time. If this happens often it is a good idea to produce the article by interviewing the potential author and recording the conversation on tape. This can then be written up either as a formal interview or as an article with a few quotations. Most articles will need to be rewritten to some extent, to make them more palatable, because the average contributor will be inexperienced. Even if you shirk rewriting the entire article, it is often worth rewriting the opening paragraph—as with other activities, the opening line is important and a better one can often be found a few lines further on. The title is important too, and in my opinion it should be eye-catching rather than just informative.

Finally, the last golden rule is perseverance. Even if you have early failures, it is important to keep on trying. What I have described so far is the 1% inspiration. It is up to the student editor to provide the 99% perspiration.

No reprints are available from the author.

Medical Education

Training in the hospital specialties in Britain in 1975

JAMES PARKHOUSE, R A DARTON

British Medical Journal, 1979, 1, 670-672

In 1975-7 we conducted a survey of all identifiable senior registrars in hospital specialties to determine the length of their training, the proportion who had changed their choice of specialty, and the amount of movement between health authorities during training. We present here a preliminary report of our main findings: full details will be published elsewhere.

Methods

We asked all employing authorities in Great Britain for the names and addresses of all senior registrars in hospital specialties (excluding

Department of Anaesthetics, University of Manchester, University Hospital of South Manchester, Manchester M20 8LR

JAMES PARKHOUSE, MD, FFARCS, professor

Department of Econometrics and Social Statistics, University of Manchester, Manchester

R A DARTON, DIPSTAT, MSC, statistician

those in dentistry). We sent 2838 questionnaires to senior registrars in post on 30 September 1975, but 319 were discarded because they were duplicates or their recipients were outside the scope of the study. Altogether 1921 of the remaining 2519 questionnaires were returned. Five senior registrars to whom we had not written also replied; they, and five from a pilot study, were included in our analysis of the findings. The overall response rate was 76%. Thirty-four senior registrars who completed the questionnaire were locums. When analysing each item in the questionnaire we excluded respondents who did not answer that particular question.

Results

Table I shows the numbers and sex distribution of respondents by specialty, with the proportions who were born in the UK or Ireland, had changed their career choice at some stage, and had made their final choice of career by the end of the preregistration year. All branches of internal medicine other than general medicine, paediatrics, and ophthalmology are treated as a single group. Similarly, all branches of surgery except general surgery are grouped together.

Comparison of the proportions of men and women respondents with official figures for full senior registrars in Great Britain indicated that the sample obtained was reasonably representative.

Age—The percentage of respondents aged under 33 years ranged