

Choosing a publishing partner: advice for societies and associations

Mark Ware

Mark Ware Consulting

© Mark Ware 2007

This is a preprint version of an article that has been accepted for publication in *Learned Publishing* (probably in the January 2008 issue).

Abstract

For societies and associations seeking a publishing partner, the healthy competition between publishers means that the deals on offer have never been better. The problem for the society is distinguishing a good short-term deal (say, an attractive financial offer) from the partnership that will actually be in the better long-term interests of the journal. This article, based on the author's experience as a publisher-turned-consultant advising societies, offers a framework for selecting a partner based on a careful analysis of what the society needs from its publisher in the long term. We conclude that underlying the performance of the best publisher partners are a good understanding of the needs of societies and their journals; a strong service orientation; and an ability to plan strategically for each journal on the basis of facts and data.

Introduction

Journal publishing has never been more turbulent nor more uncertain. For publishers, trying to stay abreast of developments in technology and business models is part of their role, but for learned societies and professional associations it is often much harder to keep up with changes in the publishing industry. Many societies contract out their publishing to commercial publishers; what should they be looking for from their publishers today, and how has this changed?

I write this article as a publisher-turned-consultant who has carried out many journal tenders and publishing reviews on behalf of society and association clients over recent years. Although each society is of course different in its situation and needs, I believe there is enough convergence for some useful generalisations to be possible.

This article is aimed primarily at learned societies and professional associations, but it may also be of value to the publishers that serve them. It is not a 'how to' guide to putting your

journal out to tender. (Gillian Page's article 'Putting Journals out to Tender' is a good starting point for this¹). Instead, it is intended to give an inside view on the approaches that societies adopt in selecting publishers and the factors that distinguish the good publisher bids from the also-rans.

The competition for society and association journals among commercial (and larger non-profit) publishers has never been stronger. The reasons for this include the challenges they face in growing their journal revenues organically and the difficult environment for new journal launches, with open access and mandated self-archiving offering opportunities but also putting increased risk and complexity into the market.

In this environment, many publishers have concluded that publishing on behalf of societies and associations can be an attractive business. Adding already established journals will increase revenues and profits far faster than launching new journals, and without the capital cost of acquisitions. In uncertain times, economists talk about a 'flight to quality' – for publishers, holding 'must-have' material certainly feels more secure than marginal content – and society journals are often of top quality. Relationships with influential societies can have marketing benefits, and at a time when the open access debate has put commercial publishers on the defensive, they can see value in working more closely with the community.

What societies need in a publishing relationship

Societies, quite properly, generally take a long-term view of the world. Their leaders' main jobs are as academics; in some cases they may be in office for only a few years. This can lead them to emphasise the 'stewardship' aspect of publishing management – they want to hand on the society, and its journal, to their successors in at least as good state as they received it. This perspective can also sometimes lead to societies being more risk-averse than many publishers.

Because society officers are full-time academics but only part-time journal managers, when seeking a third-party publisher they will be looking for a source of the professional experience and knowledge they lack. This is even more necessary now, when the journal market looks more complex than ever before.

The key areas for societies to think about are, therefore, finding publishers who will match this long-term view and provide the necessary strategic understanding and support.

The long term

Taking a long-term view can mean different things to different people. In this context, the most important areas are: the financial arrangements; the journal's reputation and standing; and the publisher's partnership style.

Financial arrangements. Contrary to what some publishers might think, societies do not generally seek to maximise the short-term financial return from their journals. I have repeatedly seen societies whose shortlist – and indeed final choice – did not include the publishers offering the most generous terms. Societies and associations are usually not-for-profit bodies, often charities, whose trustees are required by law to obtain the best value from external contracts. So why would a society not necessarily select the best financial terms? Although it might not express it in these terms, a society may well act to maximise the long-term asset value of its journal: that is, it may be willing to set off slightly worse financial terms in the short term against its belief that a particular publisher is more likely to secure the long-term success of the journal and/or is more likely to maintain or increase sales over the long term. That is not to say, of course, that a society should not try to optimise the terms it can get from its selected publisher ...

Journal reputation. Societies and associations rightly want their journals to be the best they can be. They want to improve the Impact Factor and the ISI ranking. They want to attract the best authors. They are often concerned about the influence and reputation of the journal in the field – they may see its influence as being important in attracting and retaining members. They want the journal to be used, to be read and to be cited. They understand that all future distribution will be electronic.

Societies will therefore look for a publisher who appears to offer the best chance of maximising these factors over the longer term, not just the one offering the highest royalty rate or profit share.

Partnership style. If a society is to enter into a long-term partnership – and in my experience the last thing societies want is to change publishers every 5 years – it is important that the publisher's style is one it feels comfortable with for the long run. The society will typically be looking for an open and transparent approach but one that recognises and respects their independence. The society wants to feel that the publisher is easy to do business with, accommodating to the society's idiosyncrasies, tolerant of the society's need for deliberation and consultation but speedy to act itself.

Strategic understanding and support

These are turbulent times for scholarly publishing. Societies are well aware of this and see it as more important than ever that their publisher understands the strategic changes in publishing and is in a position to help them navigate the rapids ahead. There are three aspects to this: an understanding of the field of learning; an understanding of how journals are developed; and a sympathy for society values.

Understanding of the field. Although society members are the academic experts in their field, they do expect their publisher to have an appropriate understanding of their field. Partner publishers should know what the key developments in the field are, who are the leading academics and where they publish. They should know which are the leading journals, and how they differ from and compare to the society's own journals. How else could the publisher be an effective partner?

Journal development. Societies know that they want to develop their journals, but how to do this in practice is not their area of expertise. They therefore require their publishers to have a deep understanding of how their journals can be developed. They want to be reassured that journal development means the same thing to the partner publisher as it does to them – primarily quality, reputation and influence, rather than size and price. They want the publisher to show that it has a proven methodology for developing journal quality and can demonstrate it with relevant examples.

Sympathy for society values. This does not mean that societies do not want their publishers to act in a commercial manner: for instance, one of the key strengths they are looking for is the ability to reach the widest possible audience through effective sales and marketing. And most of the societies I work with perfectly understand and accept their publisher's need to generate profits. But they do want publishers to demonstrate a respect for the values of scholarship, integrity and rigour.

Key criteria

The three criteria to which my society clients have consistently given the highest weightings when evaluating initial written bids are: electronic publishing; sales and marketing capabilities; and the estimated total financial value over the life of the contract. (Note that these are somewhat different from the criteria used for the final selection, which we shall discuss later.)

- Electronic publishing here includes the ability of the publisher to use electronic media to sustain existing revenues and/or drive new ones – it is not primarily about the 'bells and whistles' of the platform itself.

- Sales and marketing capabilities (including author and end-user marketing as well as marketing to purchasers) are at the core of the value added by a third-party publisher over what many societies could do for themselves, given the wide range of out-sourced capabilities that are available to them.
- Financial terms are important, unsurprisingly, but they are not the only factor.

The next three criteria can vary among societies but generally they are: the quality and reputation of the publisher's existing list in the sector; operations; and the transition plans.

- Societies naturally want their journals to be part of a high-quality list. This can sometimes raise awkward questions of conflict of interest, for instance if directly competing journals are in the publisher's list (though publishers tend to see marketing synergy, e.g. the opportunity to share marketing costs across several titles, where societies see conflict of interest), but they do not normally want to be the only journal in their field on the publisher's list.
- Operations means editorial and productions systems, quality control processes, article handling systems, turn-round times and publication schedules, print quality etc. – can the publisher deliver the systems, the quality, publications times etc. that the society is looking for?
- It might be surprising to publishers to see transition planning so high up the list of criteria, but the reason is that societies see a transfer from one publisher to another as a significant risk that needs to be minimised.

This ranking of criteria applies to the initial assessment of written proposals. At the stage of final selection, however, the ranking may be different. There will usually be specific issues for each society or journal, but in general I would say the top criteria at the final stage would be:

- The impression created by the publisher's staff, both in meetings/discussions and at the formal presentation stage: credibility, likeability of the team, effectiveness of the publisher's presentation, etc. Does it appear that they will bring something to the table in terms of their own expertise, knowledge and experience?
- Strategic support, as discussed above
- Flexibility, willingness to work with the society as an equal partner
- Sales and marketing capabilities, especially the publisher's ability to access large numbers of end-users through library consortia deals
- Financial package.

- Fit and/or conflict of interest.

What makes a successful partner publisher for societies?

In terms of numbers of journals and its reputation amongst societies and associations, Blackwell (now part of Wiley-Blackwell) has been among the leading partner publishers in recent years. It recruits from the same talent pool and has access to the same suppliers as other publishers, so what makes the difference? Probably one key factor is simply that Blackwell has focused on society publishing and made this a priority for its business. Not every publisher wants to have such a large proportion of its list owned by third parties, of course, but nonetheless there are lessons to be learned.

Publisher reputation

First, a successful partner publisher will have built a reputation for working in a way that suits societies rather than itself.

It ‘squares the circle’: acting as both big and small – a global publisher with real sales clout, but with a small close-knit team working with the society. It reflects traditional values, but employs leading-edge electronic systems. It is both commercial (e.g. in terms of best-practice management and procurement) and also sympathetic to the core ideas of scholarship and learning.

Second, it acts as part of the community. As well as its editors being regularly seen at conferences and in constant communication with the key players, the organisation is also seen to be part of the academic community in a more fundamental way. This is obviously easier in some ways for a not-for-profit publisher (such as a larger society or university press) to achieve, but many large commercial publishers, or their imprints, have similar relationships.

As a society evaluating a potential publisher partner, it is important to view these issues critically and not be swayed by possibly outdated perceptions. Discussions with editors and societies currently working with the publishers in question are probably the best way to assess the reality behind the publisher’s spin on the one hand, and ill-informed or out-of-date gossip on the other.

Service

A key feature that distinguishes successful partner publishers is that they have developed a true service mentality towards their society clients; some publishers can appear to forget that the client owns the journals. For some publishers, it can be all too easy to slip into a position

where the need to consult with the society can feel like an irritating obligation, or where dealing with the society's requests is seen as getting in the way of the 'real work'. The best kind of service may simply derive from little more than paying attention: staying ahead of developments and anticipating questions and problems rather than responding to them.

It is important that the publisher be visible at the society's conferences, and at the other key conferences in the field. For many publishers, this may not appear the best way to spend the marketing budget (and it certainly does not have the measurable return on investment of electronic marketing), but it is usually important to the society that the publisher works in this way.

Not all societies will want it, but publishers focused on societies may also offer society management services, such as membership database hosting and conference support services. Learned societies and professional associations that rely on their journal to attract and retain members may struggle in a time of widespread electronic licensing (because many members will have access to the journal through their institution), so it could be valuable if the publisher is able to assist the society in developing new services (for example, online continuing professional development).

A good publisher will offer strong support for the Editor(s) (and not just because they may have a key role in deciding whether the contract gets renewed or not!). This might include appropriate editorial budgets, perhaps including the costs of editorial travel, editorial/secretarial help, budgets for board meetings, etc. The publisher may also offer to fund such things as annual strategy away-days, and society or editorial conferences.

If the journal is not already using an online submission system, it is in everyone's interest to move to such a system as soon as possible. The publisher should, however, ensure that everyone gets full training and support through the transition – in a survey for ALPSP looking at online submission², I found that Editors who did not get adequate support through the introduction had notably lower approval scores for the system.

Much of the reporting that publishers provide for their society clients is very poor. The society deserves the same kind of reporting that the publisher would provide to its own management: results should be supported by commentary, comparison to previous years, to budget, to forecast, and to the competition, and with explanations and mitigation plans for any negative variances. Societies frequently complain to me that their publishers' reports are incomplete and late, that the publisher is slow to answer any queries the society raises on the reports, and even that the financial reporting is incorrect. Too often the publisher does not seem to learn from experience, and the same queries are raised year after year. It should not be hard for publishers to develop an effective template and see it is adhered to.

The bid cycle

Good partner publishers are effective at managing the bid cycle. They do not just appear when the RFP (Request for Proposals) is issued but will stay in touch with the society over the preceding years.

This may be done primarily in the publisher's own interests but it will also benefit the society to have established relationships with a range of publishers. This will not only provide a perspective on their strengths and weaknesses but may also be valuable in determining what issues to address in the RFP.

If a society decides to award a contract to a new publisher, the entire period between the award and completion of the transfer to the new publisher is critical; it is essential to minimise the potential risks involved in the transfer. The publisher will ideally be able to demonstrate substantial, recent experience of doing this for other societies and have an established team and/or process in place to manage the transfer. The publisher should as a minimum be able to show a detailed plan and timetable for the transfer of the journals subscriber list, notifying subscribers and subscription agents, moving the electronic files. There are useful guidelines available from ALPSP³ and an emerging code of practice, TRANSFER⁴, produced by the UK Serials Group that also offers useful guidelines even if the two publishers involved have not formally signed up to it.

Evaluating publisher bids

What factors should societies use to distinguish the winning bid from the runner-up? Competition for society journals is fierce, and the society may well find that all the competing bids will (at least on paper) address their main requirements equally effectively, and that financial terms are (or can be negotiated to become) similar. A number of things can make all the difference.

Presentation and substance

While the substance of the bid is of course fundamental to the assessment, societies should not ignore presentational aspects, because these are indicative of the publisher's approach to service.

Publishers should, for instance, be capable of writing and editing a bid in a way that makes the proposal easy for the society to assess against its stated requirements, rather than (for instance) simply following the layout of the last bid they did.

Proposals should have a personality, and not read like a committee report assembled from independently prepared parts: it sometimes feels as if the people writing the different

sections of the proposal do not speak to each other. And of course the proposals must be well written, tightly edited and professionally designed and printed: after all, this should be a publisher's stock in trade. As the Quality experts used to say, if the ash-trays weren't emptied, the passengers were entitled to conclude that the engines hadn't been serviced either.

The proposal should be balanced: it needs to be strong in all areas, not just (say) on the financial side, but in all the key areas mentioned above.

The publisher's approach to the presentation and the subsequent discussion can really affect the outcome strongly. Societies may not want a slick, hard-sell presentation, but they should expect to see some basic competence in presentation skills; it seems astonishing, but I have even seen presentations that have clearly not been rehearsed.

An evidence-based approach

As far as possible, a good publisher bid will avoid generic descriptions (that is, information that everybody can (and does) offer), but will find ways to distinguish itself, meaningfully, from the other bidders.

Given that all those who have been invited to bid are likely to have pretty similar *capabilities*, at least on paper, how can a publisher distinguish its own proposal?

The good publisher will try to get away from presenting a simple descriptive account of the services it offers. Instead evidence, data and hard analysis should be used to build up a strategic account that focuses on the results the publisher will deliver.

Let us take as an example the journal development section of the proposal. The best proposals I see include a detailed analysis of the competitive situation: the strengths and weaknesses not just of the society's journals but also their main competitors. Some publishers do desk research or even author surveys to inform and support their proposals. Good bids will show a well-tested process for developing journals, and give the evidence to support this in terms of case studies, examples and so on. A good bid might also show how existing databases can be used to target potential authors, and share the numbers and analysis behind this.

If the journal is currently self-published by the society or association, the bidding publisher may well assert that its consortia licensing arrangements will deliver an increase in visibility and accesses. However, a better proposal will demonstrate how consortia licensing will increase usage of the journals, perhaps by showing an example of a similar journal that benefited from the same change.

Sales and marketing sections lend themselves to a structured, data-driven approach. The publisher should not take up pages describing activities that are entirely generic and do not distinguish it from its competitors. ('We produce flyers, go to conferences, use e-marketing campaigns to target authors, etc.'). Rather, the better publisher will (for instance) show an analysis of the worldwide market broken down by territory and type of institution, calculate existing penetration rates, and propose new targets based not on wishful thinking but on the results achieved by its other journals. It will then show how its marketing activities will be structured to deliver these targets over a five-year period, and link everything to the financial projections.

Of course, this is all a lot harder for the publisher than cutting and pasting a template marketing section from its last proposal – but these are the things that distinguish those willing to make the effort.

Winning factors

At the final selection stage, there is often little to choose between the two leading candidates: they both will have scored highly on all the key criteria. The following are the factors that actually made the difference in journal tenders I have worked on, tipping the balance in favour of one publisher rather than the other.

Ability to develop the journal has been an important differentiator. Winning publishers put forward more, and better, ideas; they had an established and demonstrable process for journal development; and they were seen to provide more 'strategic support'.

Sales and marketing capabilities were probably equally important in tipping the scales. Factors here include: consortia strength (size matters here – publishers with the largest existing pools of licensed institutions can offer an immediate increase in availability for the journal); projections that were seen to be realistic and evidence-based; marketing clout in the parts of the world where the journal was weaker; stronger non-subscription sales capabilities – this last is an area where publishers do differ quite a lot in terms of capabilities and experience, and advertising and reprint sales can be important for (say) clinical journals.

Other factors that have swayed societies include: personnel – the quality of the individuals, an apparently effective team, and strong presentations with good interactions; the perception of the publisher in the marketplace; and the risk of moving from the existing publisher (which can give the incumbent a perhaps unfair advantage). And in some cases, yes, an attractive financial offer can be crucial, particularly if it offers stability for a society with otherwise limited assets.

Conclusions

For societies and associations seeking a publisher partner, the healthy competition between publishers means that there are extremely good deals on offer. The problem for the society is distinguishing a good short-term deal (say, an attractive financial offer) from the partnership that will actually be in the better long-term interests of the journal.

As in so much of life, knowing what you want is the first step to achieving it. One approach is to determine a detailed set of criteria for evaluating publishers and their bids, and to take the time to prioritise this list along the lines we discussed at the beginning of this article.

The problem then arises that many of the leading publishers have similar capabilities when it comes to the basics (and indeed even out-source many functions to the same set of vendors, for instance for online submission systems, copy-editing and typesetting, distribution, electronic publishing, and so on). However, three of the factors that underlie the performance of the best publisher partners are a good understanding of the needs of societies and their journals; a strong service orientation and all that this engenders; and an ability to plan strategically for each journal on the basis of facts and data, rather than adopting a standardised template. Adopting this approach will help societies and associations find the right publishing partner for the long term.

Mark Ware

Mark Ware Consulting Ltd

mark@markwareconsulting.com

www.markwareconsulting.com

References

¹ Page, G. 2000. Putting Journals out to Tender. *Learned Publishing*, 13: 209-20. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1087/09531510050162048>

² Ware, M. Online submission and peer review systems. Worthing, Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers, 2005. http://www.alpsp.org/ngen_public/article.asp?id=200&did=47&aid=274&st=&oaid=-1

³ When a society journal changes publisher: ALPSP guidelines for good practice. ALPSP Advice Note No.18, <http://tinyurl.com/262cma>

⁴ The TRANSFER Code of Conduct, UK Serials Group. <http://www.uksg.org/Transfer/Code>