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The Editor's Secrets

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This editorial provides an overview of the editorial process at one peer-reviewed publication. The editorial starts by explaining the role of the players (the editors, the review team, the area editor). The editorial then covers each step in the review process, from how reviewers are selected to how authors should respond to different outcomes. The editorial ends by discussing citation metrics, appointments to the editorial board and copyrights. This article argues that (1) requesting more reviews yields a faster, more informative review process; (2) publishing more articles can raise citations per article; (3) for many submissions, some reviewers should evaluate procedures, whereas others should evaluate contribution; (4) reviewers should not micromanage revisions; (5) editors must, unfortunately, write overly cautious decision letters; and (6) it is important to reward reviewers with board appointments and published acknowledgments. Journals must be author-friendly to survive.

Key words: marketing science; electronic journals; print journals; citations; peer review; referees; research streams; the review process

The Major Challenges Facing Scholarly Journals

An unsettling number of great discoveries have never been published in scholarly journals or were initially rejected. This outcome should be the biggest fear of the editor in chief (EIC).

Mathematician Albert W. Tucker's famous prisoner's dilemma game (Tucker 1950) went unpublished in an academic journal until recently (Tucker 1983). The marketing mix first appeared in a presidential address to the American Marketing Association (Shugan 2004). One of the groundbreaking articles on brand loyalty appeared in a magazine (Brown 1952). Many of the original concepts of customer lifetime value were developed at credit card companies and appeared only in magazines. McFadden's often cited justification for logit models appeared in a book chapter (McFadden 1974). Staelin (1998) cites the Gans and Shepherd (1994) study, which reveals that many extremely influential economics articles were repeatedly rejected by economics journals. Numerous other studies (e.g., Armstrong 1979, Peters and Ceci 1982, Azbel 1993, Daniel 1993) have come to similar conclusions. Shepherd (1995) reports Sharpe's account that when his famous capital asset pricing model (now with over 2,000 citations) was rejected by the *Journal of Finance*, the editor told Sharpe that his "'assumption that all investors made the same predictions was so preposterous that it makes his conclusions uninteresting.'" Nobel Laureate Akerlof's seminal paper on the market for lemons was rejected by the *American Economic Review*, which replied that "AER did not pub-

lish such trivial stuff." The *Journal of Political Economy* rejected the paper because "the paper was too general to be true." The *Review of Economic Studies* rejected it because, again, "it was too trivial." See Shugan (2002) for still more examples.

Hence, scholarly journals make mistakes, and these mistakes have consequences (Starbuck 2005). Moreover, mistakes will persist unless we learn, and learning requires feedback. Reviewers, who are part of larger review teams, can sometimes learn from companion reviews. Area editors (AE) could learn from compiling and analyzing the final outcomes of their past decisions. The EIC can learn, but sadly that learning often comes long after the EIC's term, if at all.

We must wonder whether every EIC looks back over the past 10 years and contemplates past mistakes. In retrospect, why were manuscripts rejected that should have been published? Why were manuscripts published that were either wrong or irrelevant? More importantly, how do we improve the peer-review process? Perhaps the invention of the World Wide Web and the rapid dissemination of information will mitigate mistakes by scholarly journals. However, we still need better metrics to perpetually improve the peer-review process. Moreover, scholarly journals might need a new business model to survive (Shugan 2003).

Finally, editors seldom document what they have learned and their ideas for producing better outcomes. Although the following editorial probably provides few solutions for all of the preceding problems,

it might provide some useful ideas, allow some institutional learning, and reveal some hidden parts of the peer-review process.

What Do Editors Do?

Substantial mystery surrounds the process of reviewing at scholarly journals (Hamermesh 1994). Some authors believe that the job of the editor-in-chief (EIC) is to reject all but the very best manuscripts. This belief is inaccurate. For scholarly journals, the EIC relies on the peer-review system to determine manuscript quality (Shugan 2006). When the EIC accepts manuscripts based solely on his or her own tastes, the publication is no longer a scholarly journal—it becomes *Time* magazine. Obviously, EIC tastes do matter (Medoff 2003), but tastes only influence marginal cases when peer review produces mixed recommendations.

The EIC's primary job is ensuring the journal's on-time publication. To accomplish that job, the EIC must ensure a sufficient number of submitted manuscripts, keep the duration of the peer-review process sufficiently brief, and ensure some manuscripts survive the process. Moreover, a good EIC wants the published articles to impact both future research and application. Hence, the goals of the EIC and author often align. Both want to publish articles in the fastest possible time (Clark 2000). Both want to publish articles with impact. Both want a successful review process. Hence, as an author, the EIC is your friend and should keep the journal author-friendly. Although the EIC might fail to provide any constructive comments, fail to repulse hostile reviews, or fail to alleviate a painful rejection, the EIC is often the only person involved in the review process who worries about having a sufficient number of articles to fill the next issue of the journal. Of course, journals do certify manuscripts as not obviously wrong. That certification does require rejecting many submissions. Moreover, making the process too efficient might encourage frivolous submissions (Azar 2006, 2007). Let us now consider the roles of other people in the peer-review process.

What Does the Review Team Do?

The primary role of the review team is to critically evaluate submitted manuscripts. Obviously, when the review teams can substantially improve manuscripts, that is highly desirable (Laband 1990). However, although constructive suggestions for improvement are certainly very welcome, the primary task of the review team is the fast, impartial, nonhostile, accurate, polite, and expert evaluation of the submission. Reviewer directions (Gilmore et al. 2006) and reviewer forms are absolutely necessary. Review teams should

assess the strengths and weakness of every submission. The assessment should be gestalt. Focus should be on the evidence for the findings, rather than on the realism of the assumptions (Shugan 2007). Review teams should appraise the importance of the research objective, meticulously check procedures (logic, methods, derivations, data collection, etc.), evaluate the evidence underlying all claims, ensure an adequate and accurate presentation of the results, and consider the contribution of the manuscript to extant knowledge. Review teams should clearly state their concerns and, possibly, recommend courses of actions. However, reviewer teams have no obligations to remedy deficiencies in any of these areas. Improvements are only ancillary. The review team should be evaluators rather than coauthors (Tsang and Frey 2007, Frey 2003). Misguided attempts to micromanage revisions can be futile or dysfunctional. These attempts can cause substantial delays in the review process. Requesting an excessive number of revisions burdens everyone. Micromanagement often imposes conflicting demands on authors. Authors should be allowed to retain ownership of their own research (Frey 2003). Authors should also be allowed to make the ultimate decisions regarding how to (and whether to) remedy the concerns of the review team. Recommendations should be recommendations.

Review teams are far too valuable to allow them to enter into coauthorlike relationships on reviewed submissions. Allowing excessive revisions and creating other delays in the review process greatly decreases the journal's ability to review new submissions; reduces the impact of perishable articles that require timely publication; keeps authors from pursuing new research topics; and, sometimes, leaves the EIC with the dreaded burden of rejecting a manuscript after requesting multiple revisions over an unforgivably long review process. My view is that it is unfair, if not unethical, to encourage authors to revise a manuscript as directed by the journal unless there is a reasonable chance of a successful outcome after that revision.

Beyond focusing on evaluation, we can also decrease the duration of the review process by decreasing the number of revisions. Friendly harassment of reviewers can get reviewer reports a few days earlier, but avoiding a revision can decrease the process by months. "Fast Track" submissions are one solution (Shugan 2002).

Finally, regarding the review team, sometimes the EIC chooses reviewers based only on the methods or procedures employed by the manuscript. The reason is that someone must certify those procedures, and certification often requires specific methodological expertise. Unfortunately, experts in procedures are often unable to judge the substantive contribution (Scott 2007). In these cases, we need two different

types of reviewers; otherwise, the substantive contribution could be lost (Shugan 2003, Ewing 2006). For example, a manuscript that uses quantum mechanics to better understand advertising requires an expert in quantum mechanics to judge the method and an expert in advertising to judge the contribution to the advertising literature.

What Do Area Editors Do?

As journals become more diverse, area editors (AEs) with specific expertise are needed. AEs shoulder some EIC tasks, including leading the review team to a recommendation, synthesizing sometimes conflicting evaluations into a coherent assessment, resolving conflicts, prioritizing the concerns expressed in individual reviewer reports, and making recommendations on how to proceed.

However, my view is that the EIC should always be the author's contact person, determine whether research is consistent with the mission of the journal, determine whether the contribution is sufficient to warrant publication, take responsibility for final decisions, and appoint the members of the review team. Authors should be entitled to a single decision maker who not only has access to all information about their manuscript but also has information about the content of all other manuscripts in the review process, the content of rejected manuscripts, the current overarching objectives of the journal, and the policy applied to previous manuscripts.

Although the EIC should certainly welcome suggestions from the AE, the authors, and the volunteer reviewers, the EIC should ultimately assemble the final review team. There are several reasons for this opinion. First, when the journal promises strict anonymity, the journal should keep that promise. That promise is broken when the AEs construct review teams. Obviously, double-blind review becomes impossible because the AE must know author identities to avoid reviewers with a conflict of interest. A single-blind review process allows review teams to inappropriately use author identities as a surrogate for manuscript quality.

Next, AEs who construct review teams must have real-time information regarding reviewer workloads, reviewer expertise, and reviewer preferences. It is usually possible, given disclosure of submission dates, dates when reviewers are assigned, and reviewers awaiting revisions, to infer reviewer identities for many manuscripts. Last year, we used over 80 different guest and regular AEs. Disclosure is too risky unless the journal abandons all promises of anonymity.

Second, the journal must evolve as research evolves. Some research areas will mature and incumbent researchers might inadvertently become dogmatic. Some new promising areas will emerge. Some

forms of extremely innovative research will apparently contradict past research. Often, all major journals in the same area will have many common AEs. These AEs will persist despite EIC term limits. The EIC must actively and relentlessly bring new scholars into the review process. The EIC must give new people an opportunity to prove themselves. The EIC must incessantly bring a diversity of opinion to the review process. The EIC must also ensure consistency across many areas to guarantee that the same policies are implemented in selecting review teams across myriad areas.

Finally, the EIC is responsible to the author for the final decision. The EIC is responsible for maintaining consistency in the review process. The EIC is responsible for ensuring that the stated policies of the journal are implemented. The best way to meet these responsibilities is to choose the people on whom the EIC must depend.

Now let us consider some different possible steps in the review process.

Step 1—The Submission

Every manuscript should clearly state its research question, why answering that question is a contribution, and the manuscript's answer to that question. Research questions can involve how to do something, explain something, predict something, understand something, or fix something.

Authors should only submit manuscripts after getting informal critiques, appraisals, evaluations, and all possible feedback from all possible sources (Stewart 2002). Manuscripts should be polished, well written, and carefully proofread. The manuscript should be free of grammar errors, typos, inconsistencies, inaccuracies, undefined terms, unnecessary digressions, missing information, misleading remarks, ambiguities, redundancies, and so on. Every minor problem suggests that the underlying scientific procedures might also be sloppy.

When submitting manuscripts, authors should suggest reviewers. The EIC might use those suggestions or similar individuals. Our submission form ask authors to provide a list of published articles. Possible reviewers are the authors of those articles, the reviewers of those articles, researchers who cite those articles, and the authors of similar articles. Keywords, abstracts, and articles, cited in the submission also provide potential reviewers. Some reviewers come from volunteers recruited at conferences or the journal's website. Finally, computerized systems can both identify potential reviewers and weight their influence (Rodriguez et al. 2006), whereas future systems might replace peer reviewers with reader reviewers (Mizzaro 2003, Weller 2000).

Step 2—The Desk Rejection

Desk rejections occur when an EIC declines publication without employing a review team. Different reasons cause desk rejections. Most frequently, authors fail to read any previously published articles in the journal and, consequently, are unaware of the nature of acceptable content. Other frequent reasons for desk rejections include excessive length, an extreme departure from the journal's focus, and an incoherent abstract. I sometimes assign weak manuscripts with promising ideas to a review team of doctoral students. The authors get some constructive feedback, and the doctoral students get practice reviewing. If the doctoral students find potential, we might reassess.

Excessive length in a manuscript on its first submission causes a desk rejection because it unacceptably burdens the review team. However, tables, figures, references, and purely supplemental appendices are less onerous. Hence, length restrictions should focus on whether the length of the body of the manuscript is commensurate with the claimed contribution.

For invited revisions, additional length is required to accommodate requests by the review team. The authors must still ensure that the contribution justifies the length and the burden on the review team.

After committing to the manuscript, the EIC must decide on how many journal pages to allocate to the article based on its relative contribution compared to other accepted articles. At that point, the EIC might require removal of nonessential material and movement of less important material to an online appendix. Again, the EIC must retain flexibility and allocate journal pages based on the marginal contribution of additional pages for specific articles.

Step 3—Requesting and Waiting for Reviewer Reports

As noted, the EIC appoints the AE and potential reviewers. Many authors assume reviewers are on the editorial board. Some are, but most are not. With three reviewer reports per manuscript and 540 annual submissions, we require 1,620 reviewer reports and 540 AE reports. A 60-person review board produces fewer than 200 reports per year. Consequently, we usually require over 700 different reviewers and over 70 different AEs per year. To ensure fast and efficient reviews, those figures require the constant recruiting of new reviewers (many who decline), meticulous attention to workloads, and careful matching of expertise.

Digressing, these operational difficulties cause me to dislike special issues. Beyond the content reasons to dislike them (Priem 2006), special issues create operational nightmares. We need an AE and reviewers for

more than 30 manuscripts on the same day. The slowest author dictates the time line. Time-sensitive articles languish.

Consider now the number of reviewers. I request three or four reviewers per manuscript. Some people argue that one reviewer suffices and that single reviewers work harder. I found contradictory evidence. I was previously EIC of a journal that requested only one review, and reviewers seldom worked harder and turnaround times were abysmal (despite payments for on-time performance). Review quality is more often explained by the reviewer's innate motivation, the burden we place on the reviewer, and whether the reviewer is appropriate. Moreover, requests for multiple reviewers could still result in only one review. If solicited reviewers are unhappy with my policy, I hope these unmotivated people will simply decline when asked.

Some people argue incorrectly that fewer reviewers expedite the review process. For example, suppose there is a 70% chance a review will arrive on time. Requesting two reviewers creates a 49% chance that both will be time. Requesting four reviewers reduces the probability of on-time reviews to 24%.

However, suppose we request four reviews and process after getting two reviews. The numbers change. The on-time probability is 92%, not 24%. In practice, we request four reviews, wait for 50 days, and then process with all available reviews. We tell defaulting reviewers their reviews are no longer required. At first, we usually processed with only 2.0 reviews. However, after reviewers learned our policy, reviewers became faster and average reviews increased from 2.0 to 2.6. Having more reviewers has other side benefits, including more flexibility when processing revisions, trying out new reviewers, dropping reviewers who dislike the research, and compensating for superficial reviews. Finally, having more reviewers allows compartmentalized reviews (Shugan 2003), where different reviewers scrutinize different parts of the manuscript (e.g., the derivations, the statistical methods, the data collection, the substantive contribution).

Step 4—The Area Editor (AE) Recommendation

The AE can recommend several actions. One is rejection. With rejections, the EIC first checks the actual reviewer recommendations. When the reviewer reports contradict the AE recommendations, the EIC can consider inviting a revised submission for a new review team (including a new AE). It is unproductive to send revisions back to review teams who have recommended outright rejection. Moreover, mixing new and old review teams is undesirable. When new

reviewers discover a prior rejection decision, they become concerned that the manuscript contains hidden problems, and the new reviewers become overly cautious. Moreover, we cannot force reviewers to continue to process manuscripts after they recommend rejection.

When the AE recommends revisions, the AE should list the recommended revisions by number. Recommended revisions might include specific clarifications, reporting additional information, adding new analyses, comparisons with competing approaches, and better articulating intended contributions. Recommended revisions should not include substantially changing the research question, suppressing author opinions (when opinions are stated as such), or speculating about the results of analysis not done. Moreover, never recommend the citing of unpublished research. Unpublished research is rarely archived in a final form and is subject to substantial future changes. Unpublished research may not be publicly available and might reflect only preliminary ideas. Citing unpublished research requires permission from its authors. Unpublished research rarely survives the review process (given base rejection rates). Also, unpublished sources might be gone by the time the citing manuscript appears in print. Certainly, authors should give credit as desired, but authors should not rely on unpublished research.

Finally, the AE can recommend conditional acceptance specifying straightforward corrections (e.g., clarifications, adding information, etc.) or acceptance without revisions. Of course, we can conditionally accept initial submissions despite the tradition of always wanting revisions.

Step 5—The Editor's Decision

Often, the EIC spends hours scrutinizing all the materials for each submission and then provides only a superficial letter. This occurs because the AE report often suffices. When the AE recommends rejection, the EIC can soften the rejection, but it is best not to either further demoralize the authors or give the authors false hope. When the AE recommends revisions without sufficient clarity, the EIC might enumerate and articulate the suggested revisions. Enumerating suggested revisions also assists authors when responding to the review team.

The EIC should also dissuade philosophical debates. The extant literature accepts multiple approaches. Unless a manuscript claims superiority over other approaches, many extant approaches are acceptable.

Finally, the EIC must terminate the review process when required. Termination can occur when the review team recommends additional revisions that the EIC views as unnecessary. Here, termination implies accepting the manuscript. Termination

can also occur when the review team repeatedly recommends very difficult major revisions or empirical analyses that could nullify the findings. Then, the EIC must reject the manuscript to avoid endless revisions, giving authors false hope, and wasting everyone's efforts. Sometimes, the EIC might encourage a future submission to an entirely new review team after much more progress.

Step 6—Interpreting The Editor's Letter

Once I wrote a candid letter after the initial submission. The letter stated that the reviews are positive, that the authors should please fix the minor errors, and that we are almost done. We sent the revised manuscript back to the same positive reviewers. Unfortunately, one reviewer responded by stating that the manuscript had a fatal error. The reviewer apologized for previously missing the error but said "better late than never." I wrote the authors and conveyed the bad news. One author responded and accused me of being dishonest, reneging on my prior letter, and making false promises. Further inquiries revealed that this author had not read the reviewer reports and was relying only on my initial letter. Subsequently, my decision letters have looked like legal documents.

Most editors are overly cautious when writing decision letters. Editors must carefully choose their words and make all promises conditional on future outcomes. Consequently, letters sometimes appear to be more negative than intended.

Inexperienced authors should show their EIC letters to more-experienced researchers, who can better interpret them. Remember, when decision letters invite revisions, the outcome is propitious.

Step 7—Responding to an Invited Revision

Response letters of reasonable length should always accompany revised manuscripts. Authors should faithfully paraphrase every reviewer concern. They should explain what revisions were done to remedy these concerns expressed by the review team, or politely explain why the revisions were unnecessary. They should instructively provide sufficient information to address possible deficiencies identified by the review team. Response letters should avoid philosophical debates or simply arguing procedural issues (e.g., "Other papers were exempt," "This is unfair," "You should have asked last round"). Adopt an explanatory tone rather than an argumentative tone.

Step 8—Responding to a Rejection

After receiving a rejection, there is no reason to immediately respond. Write a very nasty letter to the review

team, and then therapeutically shred the letter. It is pointless to send rejected manuscripts back to the unfavorable review team. If the review process erred, the best outcome is consideration by a new review team. At best, revisions must clarify the issues contributing to the errors. At worst, revisions require substantial new research. It is best to do the research, write the new manuscript, and then ask the EIC for permission to resubmit to a new review team. If permission is denied, there are other journals.

Step 9—The Appeal

Appeals rarely work. When manuscripts show any promise, the EIC should allow a future submission to an entirely new review team (AE and reviewers). That option is often the most favorable outcome from an appeal. Outright rejections require more research and submission elsewhere. However, at my request, John D. C. Little composed the following appeal process. Identities of appealing authors (AP) become part of the journal record and known to future editors. APs name three nominating judges (NJ) who are senior people of impeccable quality whose judgment the AP trust. The NJs must meet several objectivity criteria (listed on the *Marketing Science* website) and must supply three names to the editor as candidates for the appeals judge (AJ). These candidates must meet the same standards as the NJs. The NJs ensure that the candidates are willing to participate and are not already chosen by other NJs. The editor selects the AJ from the nine candidates using randomly generated numbers. The anonymous AJ examines all the facts. If the AJ finds merit in the appeal, the AJ reviews the rejected manuscript. If not, rejection is final. With merit, the EIC appoints a new AE to consider all facts, including the AJ's review. The EIC makes a final decision.

We conclude with three other contemporary topics on editorial policy.

Citation Metrics

Many metrics exist for evaluating the impact of research (Theoharakis and Hirst 2002, Thornton 2004), but the citations-per-article metric is most popular. Maximizing citations per article seems to require being more selective and publishing fewer longer articles. My view is that this strategy is often wrong because predicting citations is difficult. For example, very recent *Marketing Science* publications with above-average citations include diverse articles on retail pass-through (Besanko et al. 2005), customer satisfaction (Mittal et al. 2005), an editorial (Shugan 2005), structural modeling (Chintagunta 2006), the motion picture industry (Eliashberg et al. 2006), and service relationships (Rust and Chung 2006).

Suppose, for example, a journal publishes 10 articles and one article gets 20 cites in the window used for computing the metric, whereas other articles get no citations. If we publish only the most cited article, we might expect to raise citations per article from 2 to 20—a tremendous achievement. However, suppose our prediction is wrong and we publish a zero-cited article. Then, we inadvertently reduce citations per article from two to zero. Clearly, accepting an uninteresting article has limited downside risk because articles never get negative citations. In contrast, missing one highly cited article causes substantial opportunity costs. In this example, publishing one article that gets 300 citations compensates for publishing 149 articles that get zero citations. Of course, publishing many Research Notes will also fail. Best is a focus on contribution.

Appointments to the Editorial Board

The EIC often appoints review boards based on the prestige of the candidates. Prestige might matter. My view, however, requires the recognition of people who contribute to the journal. Consequently, I regularly published the names of the best reviewers (based on timeliness and productivity). I also appointed the most productive reviewers to the review board. Moreover, to recognize lifetime contributions to the journal, I created an emeritus board.

Copyrights and Dissemination

At one time, individual journal subscriptions were important because, without subscriptions, author work would achieve limited visibility. However, with Web-based dissemination and many aggregators who provide electronic dissemination of articles to libraries throughout the world, individual subscriptions have become almost irrelevant. In contrast, copyright permissions have become more critical as journals sell rights to aggregators for dissemination. The journal publisher must own the copyright. Permission to reproduce is often insufficient. There should be no copyrighted material in a submission including figures, tables, and the abstract unless the author holds a transfer agreement. Moreover, every article must have an abstract, and authors can not legally rewrite an abstract (even their own) when another publisher owns the copyright.

I hope this editorial will help institutionalize some acquired knowledge and help authors better understand the review process, editorial policy, and the incentives.

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