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Robert D. Nale

Coastal Carolina University

Robert B. Burney

Coastal Carolina University

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EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES IN TAKING A PRINT JOURNAL ON-LINE

Robert D. Nale and Robert B. Burney, Coastal Carolina University

ABSTRACT

For a number of years, an annual publication of the Wall College of Business at Coastal Carolina University (The Coastal Business Review and later, Journal) was produced in standard print form. Because of increasing budgetary concerns experienced by the University and the State of South Carolina, the cost of printing the journal in the traditional fashion became increasingly prohibitive. When publishing deadlines were missed, several avenues were explored regarding how the College could deal with the problem. While unique for an institution of this size, the creation of a totally on-line journal began to assert itself as a viable option. This purpose of this paper is merely to attempt to describe a few of the concerns, problems, and successes encountered along the way, many of which may be helpful to any institutions contemplating a similar move.

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

In 1992-1993, Coastal Carolina University's Wall College of Business began an annual publication called *The Coastal Business Review*. For several years, articles were sought from faculty throughout the Southeast. Since its inception, the *Review* (later renamed *Journal*) has published articles in a number of diverse areas such as tourism-related issues, the potential economic impact of several regional initiatives, quality issues, pedagogical issues, management accounting practices, financial strategies, strategic planning, and business ethics.

Not uncharacteristic for a publication of its type, many articles (especially in the earlier years) were authored by Coastal Carolina University faculty. The aim of the publication, however, was to attract submissions from all over the Southeast region, and the *Review* has also featured authors from such institutions as the College of Charleston, Francis Marion University, South Carolina State University, the University of South Carolina at Spartanburg and Aiken, the Citadel, Lander University, Marshall University, the University of West Florida, and Florida State University, as well as several non-academic businesses in the Grand Strand area of South Carolina. On balance, the College Administration felt that *The Coastal Business Review* was successful in terms of filling the niche for which it was originally established.

Following the 1997-1998 publication, the Editor of *The Coastal Business Review* at the time suggested that the title be changed to *The Coastal Business Journal* and that the journal be listed in *Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities*. The primary driving force behind this title change was to send the message that a slightly higher journalistic standard was now in place as it related to editorial rigor. Listing the *Journal* in *Cabell's* was a logical strategic next step intended to both

broaden the audience for article submissions, and to attempt to more clearly convey the “seriousness” of the publication. From a faculty perspective, referencing *Cabell’s* for one’s particular academic discipline is a very common first step for a prospective faculty author in terms of trying to find the best journalistic “home” for a piece. Both of these initiatives were accomplished.

The College’s plans for the *Journal* also included considering the expansion of publication from annually to semiannually. This decision was deferred until a clearer picture emerged of how successful these two significant editorial changes became.

Almost immediately after these changes were made, the existing Editor decided to step down, as other commitments were making it difficult to spend the necessary time on the newly-reconstituted publication. At that point, a new Editor was appointed. Submissions for the next scheduled issue were accepted and everything appeared to be in line for the next publication. Unfortunately, due to conflicting institutional priorities and institutional budgetary concerns, the next issue (1998-1999) languished in a publication limbo.

Adding to the already unfortunate circumstances, the Dean of the College, one of the original architects of the publication, left the University for an opportunity in the private sector during the Fall, 2000 semester. With all that was happening within the College and the University in general, the still unpublished issue of the *Journal* fell deeper into the cracks. An Interim Dean was appointed in December, 2000. After some inquiring phone calls from authors whose papers had been accepted but not yet published, it became clear that missed anticipated publication date was beginning to negatively affect the *Journal’s* reputation. At this point the problem was clearly identified, and renewed efforts began to address the publication issue.

THE PROBLEM

The general situation of the *Journal* was made far worse was the fact that this all occurred during a period of extreme financial exigency for the institution. Both the Interim Dean and new Editor were in something of a quandary over what to do next. With the steps that had been taken to bolster the reputation of the *Journal* in the region, the lack of institutional resources to allow timely publication was of paramount concern. There could be little disagreement that any publication which purports to be of any quality at all can ill afford to ignore publication schedules.

At this stage, the 1998-1999 issue publication date had already been missed, and the College was in very serious danger of missing 1999-2000 as well. As a result, everyone was agreed that publication options needed to be investigated quickly.

New to the issue of institutional budget concerns and oversight of a project like this, neither the Interim Dean nor the Editor were entirely sure how to proceed, although both were clearly committed to doing so. Investigation of the costs involved in publishing the *Journal* yielded the somewhat disquieting conclusion that there was simply not a sufficient amount of money in the budget to do it in the way that it had always been done before. In particular, estimates exceeded

\$15,000 for publication in the previous quantities. Although the number of issues printed could be reduced, the costs associated with printing did not decrease in a linear fashion. It was at this point that the option of taking the *Journal* to the web began to surface with much greater insistency.

Obviously, there are several examples of journals which had “gone electronic”, but had also maintained their print version simultaneously. As examples, such popular publications as *Barron’s*, *BusinessWeek*, and *Fortune* have been available in both forms for some time. In addition, many prestigious academic publications such as the *Academy of Management Journal and Review*, *Management Science*, *Journal of Business*, *Journal of Finance*, and *Strategic Management Journal* have done the same. Given the already foregone conclusion that the College could not afford to support a print version, this simultaneous approach was obviously one which could not afford to be pursued. As a result, going *totally* electronic began to be seriously considered. Of added interest to both the Interim Dean and Editor was the fact that this was an arena which seemed somewhat unexplored in this geographical region.

At this point, it should be noted that while in the process of investigating the traditional print options, several excellent suggestions were made. One of the more likely, and probably most obvious, solutions involved attempting to raise the funds necessary to print the *Journal* external to the University. While this was felt to be a potentially viable solution, it was complicated somewhat by budgetary concerns of a slightly different nature. Specifically, many felt that given the anticipated budgetary constraints within the State in the foreseeable future, this approach was likely to become an annual, institutionalized event. While that in itself is not entirely out of the question, it was felt that it would be better in the long-term if some other alternative means could be identified.

Another fairly obvious suggestion was to open the *Journal* to advertisers. Again, while this is something that many other academic publications have been doing for years, it had never been pursued by *The Coastal Business Journal* in the past. In discussions with others, it was finally determined that in this particular case, the fairly limited regional nature of the *Journal* would likely not allow access to the kinds of advertisers (e.g., publishers) that would normally be sought. As a result, this approach was shelved as well.

Clearly, both of the two external funding options had, and continue to have, considerable merit, and may yet be considered in the future. Quite frankly, the concerns at this stage were for survival rather than any long-term strategic viability of the publication.

SOLUTION SELECTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

After the examination of the various possibilities, the totally electronic journal option was beginning to surface as the most likely alternative and, of course, was the one ultimately selected. However, it was immediately possible to identify a potential problem in terms of acceptance. Because the on-line only format is still a relatively new for academic journals, it was anticipated that many potential authors would have legitimate concerns about such a publication. Specifically, many

academicians had already witnessed first-hand confusion pertaining to how faculty are to present evidence of their publication to their Deans and Department Chairs.

The members of the *Journal's* editorial staff personally knew this to be an issue because it is essentially the same concern which faculty have voiced about conference proceedings, many of which are now produced exclusively on CD-ROM. The issue was certainly considered a serious one. However, it was concluded that college administrators are growing increasingly more savvy regarding alternative format publications. Given the general situation of the *Journal*, the decision was made to move ahead with on-line publication. However, some steps were taken to ease acceptance of the on-line format.

Due in part to the concerns about format acceptance, there was a strong sense that certain conventions should be observed. Certainly the papers within each separate issue should be sequentially numbered just as if it were in a more traditional publication. This, it was felt, would partially address the concerns that authors might have regarding the presentation of their work to their Deans and Department Chairs. However, the traditional sequential print style page numbering also allows an easy, conventional referencing scheme. Further, this type of page numbering demonstrates the finite nature of each specific issue.

Several individuals suggested that steps should be taken to ensure that the contents of the *Journal* could be easily searchable. While neither of the principals in this project were familiar with producing an electronic document, it was clear that this suggestion presented something of a challenge.

At this juncture, the *Journal's* editorial staff realized it would be necessary to consult personnel from the University's Information Technology Services for advice. They suggested that to more easily support a searchability function, the papers should be produced and uploaded to the web in the widely-accepted Adobe (.pdf) format. Up until this point, the editorial staff had been fairly confident in its ability to implement the plan, but this excellent suggestion presented a major challenge, in that neither of the principals members of the editorial staff had any experience with, or expertise in, creating documents in the Adobe format.

In what qualifies as a somewhat amusing turn of events (in retrospect at least), the Interim Dean purchased the appropriate Adobe software, and contracted with a student to convert the papers that had been accepted (some in WordPerfect and some in Word) into the Adobe format. The student (also having no prior experience with the Adobe software) did so, and the *Journal's* editorial staff learned a valuable lesson: one cannot edit to any great extent in Adobe. The papers that had been converted still needed to be cleaned up and formatted in the *Journal's* guidelines for publication. Unfortunately, such formatting must take place prior to conversion. This, of course, is not the fault of Adobe, but the required redundant effort represented yet another significant setback in terms of publication timing. The original on-line target publication date of mid-Fall semester 2001 seemed very much in doubt.

In cleaning up the files, a second valuable lesson was learned. Prior to this time, other than requesting that papers be double-spaced, no longer than 20 pages, and completed in either Word or WordPerfect, the Editor had been fairly forgiving in terms of how submissions ought to be formatted. The result was, not unexpectedly, different styles for each submission. In the past, *Journal* had utilized one of the College's faculty members who had significant experience in newspaper publication in the past, and was able to format our pages professionally. Unfortunately, this particular faculty member had taken on different responsibilities in a different College. For the long-term success of the *Journal*, it was necessary that the entire process be accomplished using only the College's own personnel.

To reduce future problems with formatting, the editorial staff decided to implement a more comprehensive set of style and formatting guidelines to which would be rigorously adhered to in the future. After an examination of examples of the kinds of submission instructions provided by several publications, such a set of guidelines was developed. These guidelines have now been adopted and are featured prominently on the *Journal's* web page.

As mentioned earlier, the decision had been made for the *Journal* to become somewhat more demanding with respect to acceptance criteria. As part of this change, a more rigorous review process was adopted. This change was already part of the long-term plans for the *Journal*, but was all the more important in ensuring that the transition to on-line format was not misconstrued as a being associated with a move to less stringent acceptance criteria.

Up until this time, the *Journal's* editorial board had been mostly composed of faculty members from various disciplines at the College itself. This approach was clearly parochial and effort began to recruit editorial board members from other institutions as well. The efforts towards this goal have been fairly successful as is demonstrated by the institutional diversity shown in list of Editorial Board members presented on the *Journal's* web page.

The decision to incorporate a formal blind review step in the paper selection process has proven to be more problematic than originally anticipated. This blind review step, along with the expanded editorial board, has increased the *Journal's* turnaround time on submissions. While the implementation of the new review process is still ongoing, the editorial staff is convinced that quality of the publication has been enhanced substantially as a result. In this edition only this self reporting paper was selected without passing through the full blind review process.

DISCUSSION

The first on-line edition of the *Journal* was finally completed and was given a home on the University's server in early March, 2002 as the "Spring 2002" edition. Since the first on-line edition appeared, a great deal of positive feedback has been received. Submissions have continued at a healthy rate as well. The current edition, "Fall 2003" is now available at the *Journal's* permanent website (www.coastal.edu/business/cbj). As website development continues, past editions of the *Journal* will be archived on the site as well.

Initially, a mass mailings to colleges of business and academic organizations was undertaken to raise awareness of the *Journal*. This mailing coincided nicely with the first on-line edition's ultimate appearance. Also, for the purpose of soliciting submissions, presentations were made and flyers distributed at multiple regional conferences in mid-Fall 2002. Judging from the submissions subsequently received, both of these mechanisms appear to have been effective.

Since the first on-line edition, the *Journal* has received and considered twenty scholarly papers. Of these, six have been selected for publication in the current Fall 2003 edition. One has been accepted for publication in a forthcoming edition. Three papers are still under review. The remainder of the papers were rejected for various reasons. The editorial staff recognize that the submission and acceptance numbers constitutes a fairly high rejection rate. This can be attributed in the greatest part to the inappropriateness of some submissions. It is expected that as the word of the *Journal's* new focus and criteria spreads, the rejection rate will fall to into more typical ranges as potential authors better match their submissions to the new criteria

The implementation of the blind review process lengthened the lead time for the preparation of the current edition. Frankly, the members of the editorial staff were overly optimistic concerning projected reviewer turnaround times. Clearly, the managers of an on-line journal face the same reviewer turnaround lags common at traditional print Journals. It is certainly expected that as the editorial staff becomes more experienced with the blind review process that the lead times will shorten.

The desired increase in the geographical dispersion of potential authors has occurred to a significant extent. Recent submissions draw from academic institutions in Alabama, California, Georgia, Kentucky, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia as well as institutions in the Carolinas.

Of the twenty submissions, eleven were submitted by e-mail. The remaining nine papers were submitted in hard copy with the required electronic copy on diskette. It was not unexpected that the on-line submission of papers would dominate traditional methods of submission. Nonetheless, this development is still an encouraging sign of acceptance of the new format

Interestingly, the *Journal* has also received dozens of press releases from corporate promotional firms. Clearly, being on-line has expanded the Journal's potential audience, but not all of that potential audience clearly understand the mission and guidelines. Based on the current mission and guidelines, the *Journal* will not print corporate press releases or corporate news items except if such legitimately appear in context within a scholarly paper.

Another interesting occurrence was the unexpected emergence of a for-profit regional business news magazine entitled the *Coastal Carolina Business Journal*. This business magazine is completely unconnected to Coastal Carolina University. In retrospect, the unrelated business news magazine must have been under development at approximately the same time the *Coastal Business Journal* was making the transition to the new on-line format. After some initial concern, it was decided that the audiences for the two publications were distinct enough to prevent any major

problems. This indeed has proven to be the case with the exception of the occasional misdirected telephone call. The aforementioned press releases may be partially attributed to this naming similarity as well, but from the addresses used, clearly not completely.

Finally, one additional error on the part of the *Journal's* editorial staff is worth mentioning. The initial assumption was made that as an on-line journal, the staff could communicate with authors exclusively by e-mail. This proved to be a serious misconception. Even with authors who submitted papers via e-mail, e-mail proved to be an inadequate communications tool. In two instances, we learned of the failure of our attempts at e-mail communications only months later when the authors contacted us for updates on their papers. We believe that at least two factors prevent the use of e-mail as a formal method of *Journal* communication. First, e-mail systems are somewhat less than completely reliable in the face of the increasingly frequent computer virus attacks on e-mail systems at universities. Second, the academic community is fairly mobile and changing schools means a changed email address. Also, many Dean's still expect a formal printed letter of acceptance as proof of publications "forthcoming", so the *Journal* must continue this practice in the near term.

CONCLUSION

Based on experience to date, there is every expectation that the editorial staff will continue to face unexpected challenges as the refinement of *The Coastal Business Journal* continues. Although the current issue has appeared slightly later than originally anticipated, this is not expected to be a problem in the future as more College resources are being dedicated to the *Journal*. The Wall College hired a new Dean in July, 2002 who is dedicated to the *Journal* and will be taking an active role in the editorship and production of the *Journal* in the future. In the case of *The Coastal Business Journal*, the availability of resources has been the constraining factor. With the new College administration solidly behind the *Journal*, a robust future is expected.

The editorial staff of the *Journal* remain hopeful that the on-line journal concept, which continues to be unique for business educational institutions in the State of South Carolina, will continue to generate positive publicity, thereby resulting in higher numbers of quality submissions. This has been, and remains, a most interesting project. The authors of this paper and other members of the editorial staff thank you all for the interest and support you have given *The Coastal Business Journal*.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robert D. Nale, Ph.D. is a professor of management and the Chair of the Department of Management, Marketing, and Law at Coastal Carolina University. He is co-author of a successful management textbook and the author of numerous academic papers pertaining to business management and economic development. In addition to his administrative duties, Dr. Nale continues to teach and serves as the Executive Editor of the *Coastal Business Journal*.

Robert B. Burney, Ph.D., CFM is an assistant professor of finance at Coastal Carolina University. In addition to teaching, Dr. Burney is active in the business outreach activities of the University, serving on several community boards. His research focuses on issues in corporate financial management and the pedagogy of finance. Dr. Burney is a former editor of the *Coastal Business Journal* and continues to serve on the *Journal's* editorial board.