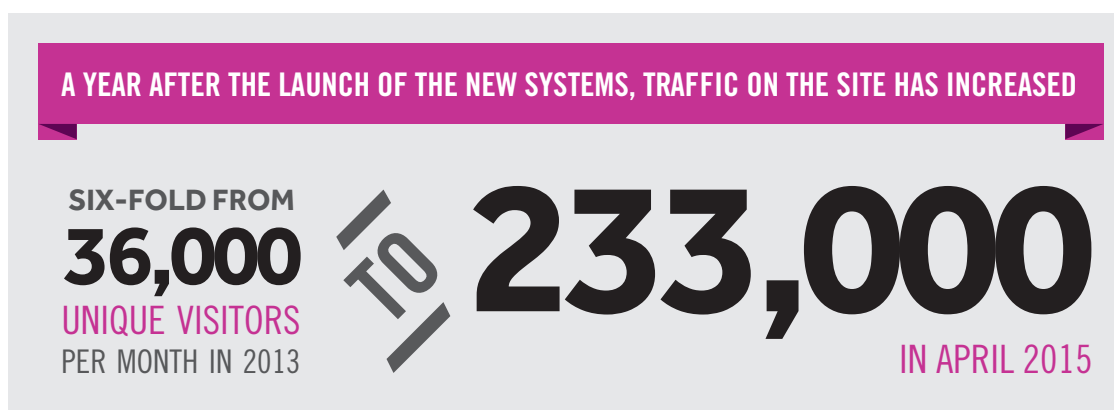# Royal Pharmaceutical Society:
The search for relevance in a competitive world

This case study is based on a presentation made by Arash Hejazi, Publisher of PJ Publications, at a breakfast briefing entitled "The Race for Relevance" held in April 2015 and hosted jointly by the PPA and Abacus. It describes the challenges faced by RPS (Royal Pharmaceutical Society) with the disappearance of its hitherto secure position as a traditional regulatory and professional body, leaving it with no guaranteed membership income and the urgent need to establish its relevance in the face of increasing competition for its audience.

RPS chose the ADvance audience engagement and Webvision content management systems from Abacus as the technology platforms to help the Society achieve its strategic growth goals, which were:

- ↘ **Increasing member value, engagement and satisfaction**
- ↘ **Attracting new membership and third party subscriptions**
- ↘ **Improving membership and subscription renewal rates**
- ↘ **Gaining market share**

A YEAR AFTER THE LAUNCH OF THE NEW SYSTEMS, TRAFFIC ON THE SITE HAS INCREASED

SIX-FOLD FROM
36,000
UNIQUE VISITORS
PER MONTH IN 2013

to **233,000**
IN APRIL 2015

Membership of the Society has grown to 44,000, representing an overall increase of 3.4% but most importantly a 19% increase amongst students and those at an early stage in their career, which ensures a sustainable future for the Society. Non-member individual subscriptions have grown, as have non-subscription revenues from such sources as advertising (which has increased by 15%) and sponsorship.

Questions from the audience, who represented senior personnel from many of the UK's leading societies and membership organisations, are included at the end, together with the responses from Arash.

⬊ Royal Pharmaceutical Society

A seismic change for the Society

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB) was held in high regard. It was both the regulatory and professional leadership body for the profession, and it was compulsory for all 70,000 pharmacists and pharmacy technicians throughout the country to register with the Society – and to pay £200 for the privilege of membership. In 2010, however, this safe, secure environment came to an abrupt end: the RPSGB assembly took the decision to separate regulatory functions from leadership and professional development. The General Pharmaceutical Council was created as the new regulator and the body with which all pharmacists were compulsorily required to register. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPS) was left with its role as a professional leadership body for pharmacists – but, crucially, membership was now voluntary.

Arash Hejazi was appointed in 2013 as Publisher, coming from the extremely successful Nature Publishing Group. **"The pressures on professional societies today are mounting. The world and members which they were set up to serve have often changed beyond all recognition. Members are no longer satisfied with the 'status' of being part of a society – they want a return on their investment. And if they**

are not satisfied, it is increasingly easy for them to turn to other sources of information and to use social networks to communicate with their peers. For a society, as providers of information, advice and support, I believe that technology is the name of the game. This is what can provide societies with the framework they need for their future."

A publishing business under threat

In common with many other societies, the RPS had a dedicated publishing arm, Pharmaceutical Press, responsible for such titles as The Pharmaceutical Journal, Clinical Pharmacist, and Tomorrow's Pharmacist. Despite a long history with some titles dating back to 1841, the publications were under threat. Readership was no longer secure, dropping from 70,000 to 30,000 as the print magazines became regarded as a luxury, rather than a must-have read. Advertising revenue started to drop (with the classified section being abandoned completely), and remaining readers were often dissatisfied with content which no longer appeared relevant to them. On top of this the publications had virtually no online presence, no strategy to tackle this and no means of attracting subscribers beyond the narrow field of pharmacists.

Defining a strategy for the way ahead

RPS took the decision to invest in technology and at the same time to revise its approach to editorial content. Arash was at the heart of this decision-making process which would play a crucial role in the future of the Society. The new strategy was encapsulated as follows:

- ⭝ To implement a streamlined digital first workflow through redevelopment of the content management systems (CMS) and platforms
- ⭝ To re-launch the Pharmaceutical Journal website with a new powerful CMS to include responsive design (making it accessible from any device including tablets and mobiles)
- ⭝ To implement a robust e-commerce system to support various subscription models and cross-selling of products
- ⭝ To support new advertising models by supporting native ads, mobile ads and targeted advertising
- ⭝ To revise the editorial content strategy with expanded news, analysis, research highlights, and to turn Pharmaceutical Journal's print edition into a premium product

"By adopting a digital first strategy, our goal was to become a digital platform first and a journal second. This would shorten our time to market, reduce costs and enable us to offer diverse products. It would support our aim of making the content more accessible, allow members to share their views and help to build a community which would feel as though it was fighting for a common goal."

Royal Pharmaceutical Society

Systems to deliver the strategy

The various existing Pharmaceutical Journal web sites where discarded. **"At Nature we had about one hundred titles each with their own dedicated teams. In the online world, this 'silo' approach simply doesn't work: it is the semantic relationship between pieces of content which needs to take priority. Looking for an article needs to be straightforward and simple and not require the visitor to understand your individual approach to indexing. Again at Nature, we had about eighty different article types – which we found we could reduce to ten. At RPS, we had two hundred article types! It is only by making web sites accessible and easy to navigate that you can hope to convert members, who may well be 'non-engaged digital users' to this new online environment."**

The commercial infrastructure of the new web site was built around the three primary aims of expanding reach, improving commercial performance (from subscription and non-subscription revenue) and becoming a key industry influencer. And to deliver these objectives, RPS needed:

- A robust e-commerce platform to support various subscription models, bundling and cross-selling of products
- Digital paywalls to support multiple access rules, including metered access and one-off or short term access models
- A new advertising platform to support native adds, mobile ads and targeted advertising

Working with Abacus

RPS produced a tender for their new digital environment, which was sent to a number of suppliers. **"Having looked at several different systems, we chose the ADvance audience management and Webvision CMS systems from Abacus. Together they offered an end to end service encompassing ecommerce, metered access, the ability to handle multiple subscription models and a state of the art CMS which would give us extreme flexibility of navigation, presentation and classification."** In addition, RPS chose Dispatch, an email distribution platform which works automatically with Webvision and ADvance, and commissioned a bespoke CPD (continuing professional development) module, delivering learning material and knowledge assessment functions within a user management structure that also delivers certification documents.

Assessing the results

The new systems went live in June 2014. Traffic has increased from 36,000 unique visitors per month in 2013 to 233,000 in April 2015. Page views have nearly trebled. Membership has also grown by 3.4% overall. However more importantly, there has been an increase of 19% in membership amongst students and early career pharmacists, which ensures sustainable growth in the future. Non-member individual subscriptions have grown, as has non-subscription revenue via digital channels.

"It is important to note, however, that the process is never finished and that a digital environment needs to be maintained and refreshed." RPS is soon to launch a new tablet web app, developed by Abacus, which can be downloaded from the web site and is device neutral, an approach which Arash believes works best in a publishing environment.

"The results for the Society to date have been very good and have certainly endorsed our decision to invest in a digital first strategy and Abacus' platforms."

Questions from the audience

Can you tell more about your approach to metered access?

Our members get access to everything by simply logging in using their password. For non-members, we operate a scalable engagement model: each month we offer some free articles but if the visitor wants access to more, they have to register. And this registration information is both important and valuable to the Society. When the visitor hits the limit of access to articles, they are then required to subscribe. This incremental access control is standard in ADvance and integrates out of the box with Webvision CMS so we can deliver all the above seamlessly. This makes it quick and easy to implement and make changes to content and access levels. With our aim of expanding our reach and our influence, this approach to metered access is very important.

What was the most important challenge you faced?

Without doubt it was cultural, especially in the environment of a conservative, traditional society. Fortunately we secured the budget we needed for our investment, but it was equally important to make staff members more courageous and to help them believe that you can trust your audience as you seek to create a dynamic, interactive community.

Tell us about your use of analytics

We have an analyst and he provides a monthly dashboard of results. This provides information to the editors on how many visitors they have attracted to a specific article. Initially they hated this but now they are completely engaged with it and compete amongst each other, even fighting for traffic! They liaise with other journals and nationals to increase traffic - they have definitely become 'analytically engaged'.

Do you need to have a wealth of content to justify metered access?

You do need to have a certain level of output but it is a balance. We have moved towards providing an interpretation of relevant news, which is our 'added value'. We include snippets of news from external sources as well as encouraging user generated content using our blogging platform, which

is provided by Webvision. We have guest bloggers and this is proving very popular as people want a channel to promote their views, but don't want to set it up themselves.

Has the journal changed?

Yes, a change in editorial strategy was an important part of our overall change of direction. We looked very carefully at what our readers wanted, which was predominantly information on drugs and the science behind pharmacy. Although our audience is mainly British, we needed to offer global coverage and relevance but with a local focus. To date, we have won two awards for our data journalism.

Incidentally we continue to print more than 30,000 copies (as one of our digital subscription models includes a printed edition) so it seems that our members wish to retain the printed journal and subscriber numbers are growing from all over the world.

What can you tell us about job and classified ads?

We bought a job board package from Madgex and this was integrated with Webvision. It was launched in early 2015 and is accessible to our 230,000 visitors. Importantly, we have a single sign-on (SSO) between the two platforms so that our users do not have to log in with separate credentials. We have included job ads for health care professionals and scientists as we extend our reach to the wider pharmaceutical industries.

Do you have different subscription levels?

It is easy to apply metered access to either the amount of information or the type of information. However, in my experience, it is better not to have too many variables and not to provide potential subscribers with too many options because this becomes confusing. I always advocate simplicity!

Working with