Opinions differed among editors of our own journal and other editors we contacted with respect to how to prompt tardy reviewers. A telephone call is said to imply greater urgency and perhaps importance. A fax, it was argued, provides a tangible record and, if the recipient were unavailable, a fax might be seen by someone responsible for the recipient’s messages. E-mail is a highly personal means of communication and has its enthusiastic devotees, and this, some contended, might increase the likelihood of a response. Our results indicate that, opinions notwithstanding, the 3 approaches did not differ in effectiveness at one specialty journal. Two thirds of tardy reviewers responded to the contact, irrespective of how it was made, by producing a review within 7 days.

Identifying Manuscript Reviewers
Randomized Comparison of Asking First or Just Sending

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In recruiting reviewers, some journals simply send the manuscript to identified experts with a cover letter asking them to review the paper; if unable or unwilling, they may decline (“justsend”). Other journals query potential referees first, and only send manuscripts to those who specifically assent (“askfirst”). We are unaware of evidence as to which is better and authorities provide little guidance. Bishop1 does not mention the matter specifically, although his statement, “[s]ome journals send out manuscripts for review with a very simple cover letter, ‘Could you please review the enclosed paper as to its suitability for publication in this journal?’” seems to imply justsend. The objective of this study was to compare these 2 approaches.

Methods

Setting was the main editorial office of Obstetrics & Gynecology, a monthly medical specialty journal. The editor chose 2 referees for each research article received between September 2, 1999 and May 8, 2000; if fax numbers and mailing address were known for both, the manuscript was enrolled in the study. Using a random-number generator, an editorial assistant assigned one referee to justsend and the other to askfirst.

Referees assigned to justsend were mailed manuscripts and asked to return their reviews by fax or e-mail within 3 weeks; if unable to comply, they were to telephone the editorial office immediately, and a substitute was chosen. Askfirst assignees were faxed information about the manuscript (title, authors, length) and asked to indicate their willingness by return fax. If they accepted, the manuscript and the same instructions and cover letter (asking for a return within 3 weeks) were mailed. If a referee refused or failed to respond within 3 working days, a substitute chosen by the editor was contacted by fax, and so on until a referee agreed to the review (up to 4 cycles) (Figure).

Main outcome variables were (1) proportion of initial referees who failed to opt out (justsend) or who opted in (askfirst), (2) overall time for the review process (days from enrolling manuscript in the study until review received), and (3) days between mailing instructions and cover letter (asking for a response). Our results indicate that, opinions notwithstanding, the 3 approaches did not differ in effectiveness at one specialty journal. Two thirds of tardy reviewers responded to the contact, irrespective of how it was made, by producing a review within 7 days.

Author Contributions: Study concept/design: Pitkin. Acquisition of data: Pitkin. Analysis and interpretation of data: Pitkin. Drafting of the manuscript: Pitkin. Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: Pitkin, Burmeister. Statistical expertise: Burmeister.

Reference

identifying manuscript reviewers

Figure. Recruiting Reviewers: “Askfirst” vs “Justsend”

manuscript and receipt of review. Additionally, quality ratings of reviews were compared for the 2 methods, based on a global rating (5-point scale) assigned by the editor at manuscript disposition, without knowledge of assignment for this study. One editor and an editorial assistant were involved.

Sample size, based on assumed 15% opt-out for justsend and assumed 30% failure to opt-in for askfirst (power=0.80, α=.05), was projected at 300 manuscripts (final sample = 283).

RESULTS

Considering just the initial sample, of 283 justsend referees, 261 (92%) did not decline and 247 (87%) ultimately produced reviews. Of 283 askfirst referees, 181 (64%) agreed to review and 177 (63%) ultimately produced reviews. Of 283 askfirst referees, 181 (98%) did not decline and 247 (87%) ultimately produced reviews. Of 283 askfirst referees, 181 (98%) did not decline and 247 (87%) ultimately produced reviews.

Quality of reviews was assessed in the subset of 155 manuscripts in which both initial referees agreed and returned reviews, because initial assignment was both random and masked, whereas selection of substitute referees could well have been influenced by past quality ratings. There was no significant difference in quality of reviews between justsend and askfirst groups (Wilcoxon sign-rank test, P = .39).

COMMENT

We found, not surprisingly, that making potential referees opt in invited approximately twice as many turn downs as an opt-out approach. Moreover, the substantial segment of unanswered askfirst requests (21%) meant that only 64% were answered affirmatively. Although askfirst had a higher rate of turn downs, making it necessary to find a substitute referee, the time required for the overall review process was similar to that with justsend. This resulted from askfirst reviewers completing their reviews quicker than justsend reviewers, even though both were allowed the same return time. Perhaps referees assent in advance when they know their schedules will permit them to do the review, whereas those who receive the manuscript without any warning add it to their pile of work and do it when they can.

We found no indication that soliciting in advance affected review quality.

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REFERENCE