Advancing Your Medical Writing Career

Selections from the AMWA Journal

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I am an in-house hiring manager, and I have only worked in-house. I do not know what it feels like to sit on the freelance side of the fence, but my guess is that there is a good bit of uncertainty involved. Some freelances may be trying to find new clients. Some may have gotten a first job from a client but never heard from that client again and have been left to wonder what went wrong. Well, here is your chance to to get a glimpse into the mind of a hiring manager. Although some of what follows may seem like common sense, you might be amazed at how frequently the common-sense information gets left behind.

Getting Noticed

A number of venues exist for freelances to get noticed by hiring managers, and several of those opportunities are hosted by AMWA:

- **AMWA Listserves**—Well-written, professional posts to this venue are sure to get a freelance noticed. I have hired several writers who I first noticed on an AMWA listserve and who have subsequently received countless additional assignments from my company. Be careful: Just as a professional e-mail might be noticed by someone like me, an unprofessional one is even more apt to be noticed and could land the freelance on a hiring manager’s “do not call” list.

- **AMWA Freelance Directory**—When I am searching for a new writer, this is typically the first place I go. Nicely formatted entries with a clear focus are essential. I am more drawn to listings that show a clear specialization than those that cast a wide net. And please do not leave me wanting more! For example, entries that include Web site URLs give me an opportunity to learn more about a freelance before I contact him or her.

- **AMWA Annual Conference**—Network, network, network. I have hired medical writers whom I have met while attending the AMWA conference.

In addition to the AMWA venues, freelances can also get noticed by having a good Web site and a solid online professional/social networking presence (eg, LinkedIn, Twitter, blogs). Freelances can also research target companies and send a CV with an engaging cover letter that expresses an interest in freelance work. I do not like to receive cold calls; the few I receive always seem to come when I am 10 minutes from a pressing deadline with 20 minutes of work left to complete.

Getting Hired

My beautiful truth about hiring a freelance is that once I have identified the person I want to try out, I rarely spot a red flag that makes me reconsider. I usually send an e-mail to the freelance to express my interest and ask for samples, and then I set up a phone call to find out more about the freelance and discuss the particulars of a project. By this point, the freelance has already made a positive professional impression on me, so the key during our conversation is that the freelance be confident and reinforce my existing impression.

What could mess up the freelance’s chance at this point? Here are a few things that have made me reconsider hiring a writer. It is probably not surprising that most have to do with money.

- **Quoted an hourly rate that is significantly below fair market value for his or her skills.** Some writers think a lower bid always wins new business—this is not true! A low hourly fee sends me the message that the freelance is inexperienced, which has scared me off in the past.

- **Asked for a percentage of the project fee up front.** I know some freelances have been burned by bad clients; I have been similarly burned by subpar writers who oversold their skills. As a practice, my company generally does not pay a percentage of the project fee up front and would not consider this arrangement with a new writer.

- **Sent signals that the proposed project fee is too low but still wanted to take the project.** This type of situation puts a cloud of negativity over the project and makes me worry about the quality of the draft we might get. I would rather work with someone who thinks our project fees are fair.

- **Been unable to provide samples.** I live in the world of continuing medical education, and samples are usually freely available, so if a freelance does not have recent samples to share, this raises concerns.

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*Based on a presentation at the AMWA Annual Conference, Milwaukee, WI on Saturday, November 13, 2010.*
Getting Rehired

Although I have had to “fire” freelance writers (ie, invoke the dreaded “kill fee”), these cases are extraordinarily rare. What is more likely to happen is that a freelance submits the project and finishes the project amicably enough but is not called back for another assignment. I tend to rehire about 25% of the writers that I give a first assignment to, and about one-half of those writers become “regulars” for me. What goes wrong for the majority who do not become “regulars”? Here are some practices that have kept me from calling a writer about another project.

• Submitted a manuscript late. Life happens, and there are times where a freelance is going to be late with a manuscript, but if it happens on the first project, if the freelance calls the day before the project is due (rather than well in advance), or if it happens on successive projects, then I have no choice but to find another writer who can deliver projects on time.

• Failed to submit the draft to the agreed-upon specs. For example, if the contract states that the freelance will submit 6,000 words and the freelance submits 3,000, it is unlikely that the freelance will receive another assignment from me unless there was a miscommunication on my part.

• Addressed confusion negatively. Despite everyone’s best efforts to outline all the particulars of a project, confusion might arise, particularly as new clients and freelances get to know each other. If this happens, a “combative” (defensive/offensive) response from the freelance makes me cringe, whereas a proactive, problem-solving approach will make a great impression.

• Communicated negatively (eg, “snarky” or passive-aggressive phone conversations or e-mails). It is rare, but I have been on the receiving end of this sort of negative communication during periods of confusion. This is the fastest way to wind up on my “never again” list, and there is no way to recover from it. If frustration levels are high, wait a few hours to call or send an e-mail to allow that frustration to dissipate as much as possible.

• “Pinged” me too much throughout a project. I am completely open to answering questions throughout the course of a project (particularly with a first-time freelance). However, freelances who call and/or send e-mails too frequently convey the message that they lack confidence in their own decisions. So how frequently is too frequently? It completely depends on the hiring manager! I have been spoiled by highly skilled writers, so I admit that my own threshold for questions is relatively low—more than one or two questions/

requests a week is too much. Other hiring managers, however, may want you to ask away. So a good strategy would be to ask a new client how often their best writers contact them over the course of a project and what kind of questions usually come up—this will provide insight into a client’s preferred style.

Now that I have described some behaviors that could prevent you from being rehired, let me offer some information on traits and behaviors that will get you rehired. I work with some truly phenomenal writers who seem to do everything right and make the work seem effortless. These writers share a number of similar qualities:

• Put forth a professional, dependable, and collaborative persona.

• Always submit drafts on time—sometimes early.

• Submit well-written, polished, carefully referenced drafts (translation: they save me time during the editing and fact-checking phases of the project).

• Send all the ancillary materials with their drafts (learning objectives, post-test questions, source articles, etc).

• Limit and/or batch questions to avoid contacting me too often.

For me, finding a freelance writer who is a great fit with my company is eerily similar to dating, and most dates fall into one of three categories.

• The scary date. It is “off” from the beginning, and you want to high-tail it out of the restaurant as fast as you can. Maybe you at least try to make it through dinner to be polite, but you know from the start you will not be calling again.

• The friend zone. These are perfectly nice people, but something is missing. Maybe the person is great except for one particular thing that drives you nuts, or maybe the person does not do anything wrong, but also does not wow you. It is just not quite what you are looking for.

• The match made in heaven. There is a mutual connection from the very start. You have the same interests, you are finishing each other’s sentences, you “get” them and they “get” you. These are the people you have amazing chemistry with, and you stay with them for a very long time.

My guess is that finding a great client is the same for those of you who freelance. My hope is that some of this information will help you turn more potential clients into “matches made in heaven.” Happy dating!
Freelancing part-time while working in a full-time job is a great way to begin to build a freelance medical writing business. This article describes the experiences of two freelances who built successful businesses by moving from part-time to full-time freelancing.

MARKETING YOURSELF FROM PART-TIME TO FULL-TIME FREELANCING

By Genevieve J. Long, PhD

“How do you get started?” is a common question from would-be freelances. I combined my backgrounds in writing and medicine. While earning my degrees in English and teaching and planning to enter academia, I worked part-time in several health care positions. Then I realized medical communication would allow me to combine my love of writing with the chance to help people in practical ways. I started working at a medical school part-time as a medical communicator and began freelancing during my off hours.

Starting out part-time allowed me to learn about freelance writing and business without the pressure of needing to earn a living. I learned by

- Reading general business books
- Reading about starting a writing business
- Asking all freelance vendors I hired about their businesses
- Accepting projects that helped me build a client base

I could have done all of the above if I had started as a full-time freelance, but starting part-time allowed me to prepare myself for success.

Benefits of Working for a Company While Launching a Business

Working for a health care employer while I started my freelance medical communication career had many benefits. I learned the scope of medical communication and about what clients need. I also had time to choose my freelance emphasis; I started out as a manuscript and grant editor but discovered that I most enjoy writing for patients.

Freelancing part-time provides the flexibility to develop ideas and a client list without the pressure of earning a full-time income. Time to set aside startup funds is another benefit. Some experts recommend having 1 year’s worth of salary, plus money for office furniture, computer equipment, and the monthly expenses of running a business, such as Internet, telephone, and general office supplies. Expenses vary based on many factors, including lifestyle and geographic area, so I recommend doing research to determine your needs.

Is Part-time Freelancing the Right Choice Now?

Part-time freelancing is a great way to try freelancing or to build a business before going full-time. If you have young children or older parents who need your attention, part-time might be best. You don’t have to tell clients you are part-time—only the Internal Revenue Service needs to know how many hours you work.

Differences Between Full-time and Part-time Freelancing

A full-time freelance does everything an employer would do: administration, marketing, operations, and IT. Some books, such as The Wealthy Freelancer and The Four-Hour Work Week, offer tips on delegating activities so you can devote more time to freelancing. A self-employed friend advised me to hire helpers, eg, house cleaners, yard workers, or bookkeepers, if they charge much less than I charge clients. For example, a house cleaner who charges $20 per hour and spends 4 hours cleaning helps you make money if you do more than $80 worth of work in that time. As your business grows, consider hiring subcontractors to help with big writing jobs.

As a full-timer, you will work harder than a part-time freelance and harder than you ever did as an employee. Bottom line: don’t become a full-time freelance writer if you want more free time. Do consider freelancing if you want control over the work you do and the convenience of working at home, with somewhat flexible (though long) work hours.

Before You Market Your Services

You must know two things before you market your freelance services: What do I offer? and Who are my buyers?

*Presented, in part, at the AMWA 2010 Annual Conference, November 11-13, Milwaukee, WI.
those be among your freelance services? If you have been out of the work force, you might need to ask yourself what you did best and would like to do again.

Consider who needs your services and why. After reading The New Rules of Marketing & PR by David Meerman Scott,6 I wrote detailed profiles of the editors, marketing managers, and others who hired me when I freelanced part-time. Reflecting on their needs helped me hone marketing messages for my full-time business, emphasizing how hiring me would benefit them.

Switching from Part-time to Full-time
My part-time freelancing lasted 7 years. I devoted 1 to 3 days to freelance work each week, billing as few as 4 or as many as 15 hours per week and spending any non-billed freelance hours on professional development and marketing. Before I went full-time, I updated my Web site, told clients about my increased availability, and changed my e-mail signature, listing services in areas where I wanted more work. Other suggestions:

- Fine-tune your online portfolio to reflect the types of work you want most.
- Practice telling people what you do in a sentence or two, until it sounds natural.
- Hand out business cards freely.

Several marketing tactics have proved successful for freelances (see list at top right).

Whether you are part-time or full-time, be professional. I recommend the following:

- A professionally designed Web site
- Professionally written marketing copy
- Professionally designed and printed business cards
- Electronic letterhead
- Accounting system
- Time-management software
- Business savings and checking accounts and business credit card

WordPress and other programs make creating a Web site easier than ever, but a professional impression requires some design skill. In addition, time spent designing and building a site could be spent writing or networking. If you lack experience writing Web content, find someone who knows how. Visitors won't read every word but scan for information about your services, qualifications, and clients. Unless you want to learn about Web sites from the ground up, you might be better off with a marketing writer, Web designer, or both.

I recommend purchasing printed marketing materials from a reputable designer and printer. Homemade business cards don't look or feel professional. Your card might be the only marketing piece you hand to a contact; it represents the quality of your work, so it's worth investing in the heavy-weight paper and quality design that are standard for most businesses. The language, colors, and typeface on your cards and other materials should match your Web site.

Proven Marketing Tactics for Freelances

- Web site: A well-written, professionally designed Web site with writing samples that you update regularly. Some things you can't show—proprietary information, for example—but you can list client names or journal titles.
- Business card: Professionally designed and printed
- Targeted direct mail: Develop mailing lists of potential clients and high-quality direct-mail pieces (flyers, postcards, a letter, etc).
- Linkedin: Write a good profile, build your contacts, and stay in touch with them.
- Partnering with other freelances: Freelances often need to refer clients to other freelances for work they do not or cannot do, or when they need help with their projects.
- For clients: Holiday gifts—give something neutral, like food—and birthday greetings.

Market to Current Clients
It costs less to keep a client than to find a new one, and keeping clients starts with doing great work. Take courses and read literature in the field to improve your work.

Be responsive. The more you value clients, the faster you should call them back. Be collegial: find out something about them, and share something about yourself. Keep it light: you both have Springer spaniels or love shoe shopping. Start slowly, but start building a bond. Business is built on relationships.

When you finish a job and your client is happy, tell her that your business grows by referrals and ask whether she knows two or three people who might use your services. Caveat: ask only if your client is happy with your work.

A note on keeping clients happy: you can be organized, personable, and do terrific work and still occasionally have a client who isn't thrilled, usually for reasons beyond your control. Don't take it personally; do your best and move on.

Finding New Clients
Focus on the best sources of full-time freelance business, and don't bother with the worst sources (see below).

Best and Worst Sources of Full-time Freelance Business

**Best Sources**

- A former employer [one more reason to start in the corporate world]
- Firms that know the former employer
- Contacts made while working for a former employer
- Clients from part-time freelancing
- The AMWA Freelance Directory and AMWA colleagues
- Referrals [once you are established]

**Worst Sources**

- Local business groups [for example, city business associations]
- Social and personal connections
- Small-business owners, including solo or small-practice physicians
LEARNING HOW TO FREELANCE BEFORE TAKING THE FULL PLUNGE
By Lori De Milto, MJ

I started freelancing part-time while I was doing marketing communications full-time for a business school. My initial goal was to learn about future career opportunities and make some extra money. But as I started freelancing, I found that I really liked it and wanted to do it full-time. At that point, I had 2.5 years before I would be vested in my university’s retirement plan. Because I wouldn’t have a retirement plan once I started a business, I decided to start freelancing full-time the month after I was vested (March 1997).

During those 2.5 years, I marketed my business and took on more freelance work so I would have a steadier income when I finally took the plunge. I developed a business name, tagline, and logo and used them in professional marketing materials (business cards, brochures, envelopes, and direct mail pieces). As a journalism major and a marketing communications writer, I had the expertise to write my own copy. But I hired a professional to design and produce my marketing materials. I also joined AMWA, attended the annual conference, got actively involved with my chapter, and signed up for AMWA’s Freelance Directory.

Investing in a Freelance Business Pays Off
From the start, I treated freelancing as a business. I invested time and money, developing high-quality marketing materials and a direct-mail campaign. I developed my own mailing lists, starting with a search of the AMWA membership directory for companies I might want to work for and contacts in those companies. The Web was in its infancy at the time, so to develop the rest of my mailing list, I went to the library to search directories of hospitals, health care associations, and other health care organizations for other potential clients. All of this took many hours.

In my first year as a full-time freelance, I sent three flyers, each to about 250 people, spending about $10,000. It was worth every penny. Within 1.5 years, I had as much business as I wanted. Some clients contacted me within days of receiving the first flyer. Others hired me after receiving the second or third flyer, and I realized that it was important to continually market my business so that potential clients would remember me when they needed help.

Finding Freelance Opportunities Through AMWA
Getting actively involved with AMWA helped me build my business. Along with using the membership directory in my direct-mail campaign, I found work through the jobs list and the Freelance Directory. As I built my experience and became more involved with AMWA, I began to get referrals for work.

AMWA also helped me learn the business end of freelancing. I talked to freelance colleagues and attended AMWA events geared toward freelances. I also read a lot of books on running a business, including Secrets of a Freelance Writer, Third Edition: How to Make $100,000 a Year or More and Guerrilla Marketing, 4th edition: Easy and Inexpensive Strategies for Making Big Profits from Your Small Business.

Building the Confidence to Take the Plunge
Freelancing part-time while learning how to market and run a business was a successful strategy for me. By the time I officially launched my business full-time, I had a few steady clients and, thus, some income, a marketing strategy, and the confidence to take the plunge.

Starting a Freelance Business Today: The Importance of the Internet
The Internet has created a very different environment from the one I faced in 1997. When I created my first Web site in 2002, few other writers had one. Today, a good Web site is essential to marketing a freelance business. Clients want to learn about your background and experience and see work samples, often before they even contact you. My first Web site was pretty basic in its design and content. In 2008, I revised my Web site, adding more content and hiring a professional Web designer. Getting the content just right took many hours of research and writing. My new design cost nearly $3,000. Based on positive feedback from clients and colleagues, the time and expense were well worth it.

LinkedIn, a social network for business, is another important marketing tactic for freelances today. I have gotten business through LinkedIn and know other freelancers who have also. By building connections with clients and contacts on LinkedIn, you can easily update them on your activities, keep track of them as they move around, and gain access to the people your connections know. LinkedIn has two useful features for freelances:

- “What are you doing?” a Twitter-like feature that keeps your connections thinking about you through periodic network updates LinkedIn sends out. I’ve used this to highlight my interesting projects and other professional activities (eg, moderating a session at the AMWA annual conference).
- Groups, including AMWA, Medical Marketing & Communications Group, and the Freelance Writers Connection, which let you keep in touch with people with similar interests and share your expertise through discussions.

Author disclosure: The authors note that they have no commercial associations that may pose a conflict of interest in relation to this article.

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References
In just 15 years, the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has grown from "a self-help group" for about a dozen journal editors to an international organization of more than 7,000 members that offers seminars at spots around the globe and educational materials in a variety of languages, according to Liz Wager, chairwoman of the COPE Council.

"It started really as a group, a sort of self-help group, for journal editors who were faced by tricky problems, perhaps allegations of misconduct, perhaps, you know, quite serious concerns about a paper, and they really didn't know who to turn to," Wager says.

The members began meeting to discuss situations that had proved vexing and to offer possible solutions. COPE's Web site (www.publicationethics.org) offers a searchable database of the cases that members have ruminated on through the years. Many of the broad topics are predictable—plagiarism, authorship disputes, informed consent, and conflicts of interest, for example—but the individual (and anonymous) details of the cases help to convey the complexities of translating overarching principles to the day-to-day management of a journal.

What should a journal editor do if an author of a manuscript under review sends a gift?

What actions should an editor take if an author submits patient consent forms signed after an experimental treatment has already been administered?

How should an editor proceed if one author of an article suddenly wants his name removed, apparently because his romantic advances had been spurned by another author?

The database includes summaries of advice offered by other COPE members, and for some, an epilogue that describes how the case ultimately was resolved. Some case discussions also are available as podcasts.

"I find the cases fascinating," Wager said. "You always think, 'Surely, there can't be anything new. We've surely heard all the cases before.' And yet every time you have the cases, there is some interesting twist to it, or something that makes it really difficult to deal with."

In addition to the case discussions, other resources provided by COPE include guidelines for new editors and flowcharts for handling certain types of ethical quandaries, such as what steps to take if plagiarism or fabrication of data is suspected. Many of the flowcharts have been translated into multiple languages, including Chinese, Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, and Croatian. COPE recently launched Web-based learning modules that are available only to members.

Journal editors and publishers who are COPE members are expected to follow the organization's codes of conduct. Complaints can be lodged with COPE if there are suspicions of code violations. If the complaint is found to have merit, the COPE Council may recommend a course of action, such as asking the editor to apologize to the complainant, publish a statement from COPE in the editor's journal, or take steps to improve procedures.

Complaints against members are rare, generally just a few per year, Wager says. COPE is planning to publish a summary of the complaint cases on the organization's Web site.

Wager, whose 3-year term as COPE chairwoman concludes in the spring of 2012, says it is difficult to measure the direct impact of COPE on publishing ethics, but notes that awareness of its activities is growing, particularly among publishers that pay for journals to be members.

"They see it not just as something nice to have, you know, some sort of little decoration. They actually think that it is really relevant to their work."
Like so many of our colleagues, we met and established a productive professional friendship by networking at a local AMWA event. As careers in medical writing tend toward a nonlinear path that requires extensive yet distinct expertise, we both have found it helpful to reach beyond AMWA to increase our knowledge and expand our professional networks. While some medical communicators focus on a specific subdiscipline their entire career, many of us find we must take on new topics as we assume new roles or manage our freelance routine. Many of us, as sole communications specialists on a project often working remotely from home, find we need a strong collaborative support system that may be found in professional societies.

Michelle Sauer is a freelance editor/writer and a research administrator. Hilary Graham has focused on research promotion and public relations. While both of us started at the bench, we have since transitioned through multiple positions with various responsibilities as our careers have progressed. Professional societies are often the easiest route to expand your knowledge and network with individuals that have similar expertise. While the majority of AMWA members consider AMWA to be their primary information resource,1 we have personally found several other societies to be of value and describe them below. We have also included a table of organizations that may be of interest to you (Table 1).

Freelance

Sauer: Personally, I have found that AMWA and the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS) have led to the most freelance work. Their directories are often searched by companies and individuals looking for writers with credentials. BELS has a rigorous, 3-hour credentialing test that will provide an added level of comfort to possible employers. The exam is offered at least 3 times during the year and requires the applicant to have a bachelor’s degree and 2 years of experience. Exceptions can be made for experience and education, and they are detailed in the application to take the test. The requirements of the application include a résumé, documentation of education, three letters of reference, and a $50 deposit. After your application is approved, you reserve your test date with a $200 fee. Obtaining the ELS after your name can be a rationale for employers to provide a merit increase, so please do not be dissuaded by the upfront cost. Although BELS does not have a stand-alone meeting, it does have gatherings at the annual conferences of AMWA and the Council of Science Editors (CSE). BELS also has a very low renewal cost ($25 per year) compared to other societies.

There was a new booth at the national AMWA conference this year: the Editorial Freelancers Association. Although neither of us is a member of this group, it is certainly high on our list to pursue. Their website is highly informative, with resources, a member directory, and active job listings. They provide a portal for prospective employers to find you as well. While their general and annual meeting is always hosted in New York, they have highly active chapter activities throughout the nation. An up-to-date calendar of educational and social events is provided online. Events are open to nonmembers at a higher fee so you can check the organization out before committing to the larger membership fee.

Grant Development

Sauer: Editing grant proposals is a natural extension for many medical writers. This is how many of us may become involved in research administration. The National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) is probably one of the most recognized and popular organizations for people doing this work. Its focus is more on research grant rules and regulations, but membership here is a great way for writers to learn about the wants and needs of grant
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<td><a href="http://www.ncura.edu">www.ncura.edu</a></td>
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<td>National Organization of Research Development Professionals</td>
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<td>Plain Language Association International</td>
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sponsors. I have found NCURA’s workshops and open discussions with program sponsors and program officers to be very valuable. You can get a heads-up on the tone and focus of upcoming grant announcements. Membership in NCURA gives you access to listserves and weekly webinars, providing you a wealth of information in a heartbeat.

Many NCURA members also go on to attain research administration credentialing. This designation is from the Research Administrators Certification Council. This stamp of approval is meant to show a familiarity with federal rules and regulations. As federal funding has become more difficult to obtain, many colleges and universities are hiring professionals who know how to write a grant proposal. Adding expertise in regulatory requirements will make your résumé stand out. Certifications are available for knowledge of the pre-award process alone (CPRA) or for both pre- and post-award processes (CRA). Like the test for BELS, these tests require an application and upfront fee, but the credentials can definitely provide a concrete measurement of your knowledge. This adds value to your position at work, as you will be seen as an expert and information source. Study groups are also available to help prepare for the exam.

National Organization of Research Development Professionals is another organization that is an excellent place for a grant writer. A rather new organization (6 years old) that I recently joined, its membership is filled with grant development and research office workers who are either trying to improve grant proposals underway or to find writers for initial drafts of proposals. Their listserves are very active with job opportunities and information. In addition, they are quick to hold a conference call if there is a particular area of interest.

Publications

Sauer: The International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP) is probably the next most beneficial organization to a medical writer. Their membership is focused on industry, pharmaceutical and medical device publications, and they provide a wealth of educational workshops, much like AMWA. They also have a credentialing system (CMPP, for Certified Medical Publication Professional) that could prove of great value if you are trying to show that you have writing experience/knowledge. The CMPP requires active participation in medical writing and education and must be renewed every 5 years. ISMPP was founded in 2005 and has been incredibly active. Their membership is over 1,000. They host a national meeting every year and produce a multitude of web-based seminars. ISMPP also has initiated committees that have resulted in important guidance documents regarding ethics (a good publication practice document known as GPP2), legislation interpretation (Sunshine Act), and publishing (the Medical Publishing Insights and Practices initiative).

The International Publication Planning Association offers both a Midwest regional meeting and an annual national meeting. This society is purely focused on industry publications, but I found it helpful even as a professional in academia. Many clinical trials involve counterparts from industry, and understanding their perspectives changed the way I interacted with them. There are not a lot of resources attached to membership in this organization, as their sole purpose is to gather people together for meetings. Their meeting locations are usually very nice, but their registration fees can be upwards of $1,500. One major benefit is free membership.

The Council of Science Editors (CSE) is tailored to journal editors and managers. I have not found it to be as helpful or valuable for me, because the organization focuses on the challenges related to journal management and publication, while my focus has usually been on journal manuscript preparation. However, there are areas of common ground. Ethics and authorship are important issues that are discussed at all meetings, and their importance has been made clear through various publications, such as the CSE’s White Paper on Promoting Integrity in Scientific Journals, updated in 2012. Besides, it is never a bad thing to know major journal editors by their first name. CSE also recently initiated a Publication Certificate Program that may be of interest to many.

Communications

Graham: While the Society for Technical Communication (STC) traditionally focuses on serving engineering, computer science, and environmental disciplines, their programing is beneficial to medical communicators too. Face-to-face meetings at the national and local levels as well as webinars focus on best practices in document design, usability, accessibility, web development, information architecture, and technology. While this group’s focus may seem far afield at first glance, I have always walked away from meetings with new knowledge that is easily relatable to my work.

If you are interested in learning more about best practices in business and mass communications, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) may be the associations for you. Both associations are active at the national and local levels and provide networking and educational opportunities as well as professional recognition via awards. Many freelance medical communicators would be well served by learning the basics of PR in order to expand their business opportunities. With topics that include conducting a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, branding a small business, communicating change, and collaborating globally,
relevance will not be difficult to find. Health Academy is a special interest group in PRSA that has rich digital discussions and a face-to-face conference each year. While PRSA is focused on strategic communications, IABC takes a word-level approach to print documents and digital media, such as tips for writing headlines that grab attention. Both associations also provide guidance on soft skills like working across generations and building interpersonal leadership qualities.

**Regulatory**

Graham: If you are involved in drug discovery and/or development, DIA and the Regulatory Affairs Professionals Society (RAPS) should be on your radar. DIA is a large global organization that has membership and education programming for each discipline required in the drug development pipeline. The general conference can be quite overwhelming, with an attendance of approximately 7,000 people, but it provides the opportunity to network with people looking to hire medical writers. The DIA's Medical and Scientific Communications Annual Forum is much smaller and only provides sessions on communications, regulatory writing, and publications. Depending on your preference and motivation, one of the DIA conferences may work for you. DIA does not have chapter-level activities but does have a large selection of online offerings that can keep members up-to-date between conferences.

RAPS provides both a certificate program (based on completing a series of courses) and a certification program (based on meeting eligibility requirements and passing an exam). The certification tests four regulatory-related competencies (strategic planning, pre-approval, approval, and post-approval) and is offered at third-party testing sites. The certificate program focuses on pharmaceuticals and/or devices and can be completed through online courses. RAPS offers webcasts, workshops, conferences, and chapter events, making participation exceedingly convenient.

**Personal Development**

Graham: The Association for Women in Communications (AWC) and the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association (HBA) provide chapter and national level networking opportunities and programming that focuses on personal skill building and broad industry trends. Because these associations do not cater to any one professional discipline, they provide excellent opportunities to step outside your immediate professional network. AWC members, in my experience, are on the creative side of the spectrum, with careers in public relations, graphic design, and digital media, whereas HBA members tend to be physicians or lawyers, or in pharmaceutical sales or hospital administration.

**One Size Does Not Fit All**

When considering the value of a professional association membership, determine which society will best meet your needs, which may include:

- Access to high-quality educational content and enjoyable programs
- Opportunities to earn credentials or win awards
- Opportunities to network with colleagues nationally and regionally
- Mechanisms to increase your professional reach and connect with future employers

Remember that any one association may not offer all that you need and that multiple memberships may provide you the platform upon which to expand your network, knowledge, and career to their fullest potential.

**Author disclosure:** The authors report that they have no commercial associations that may pose a conflict of interest in relation to this article.

**Author contact:** hngraham@me.com

**References**