

Study Finds Member Support For *Quarterly* Policy Changes

by Clifford W. Scherer

The study of ACE members conducted in the spring of 1988 provides overwhelming support for the proposed changes in the Quarterly. Sixty-seven percent of ACE members say that they expect ACE to provide a quality publication, but only 42% of all members believe that the Quarterly is a "quality" publication. This finding, perhaps more than any other, supports the proposal for major changes in the Quarterly publishing policy.

The *ACE Quarterly*, like many other publications, has undergone a number of changes over the years. Changes have been made in typography, physical size, and the use of color and photographs on the cover, among others. Perhaps the most significant change occurred in 1977 when reviews of articles, books and research were initiated. At that same time a peer-review process was introduced, allowing authors to request that their article be submitted for review by peers.

In 1987, in part due to an increase in perceived member dissatisfaction with the *Quarterly*, the Ace Board appointed David King and LaRae Donnellan to formulate changes that would address membership publication issues and needs. The ACE membership was informed of King's and Donnellan's proposals in an article that appeared in the fall issue of the *Quarterly* (Donnellan, 1987). Among the changes proposed were re-initiation of peer reviewing of all articles, changes in the editorial board, changes in content and style, and the use of graphics.

Later that year, a membership study was designed and implemented under the direction of the ACE Long-Range Planning Committee. The study sought, among other things, to examine member support for the proposed changes. This article reports on findings of that study as they relate to the *Quarterly*.

Method

All dues-paying members of ACE received a questionnaire, a return envelope, and a cover letter in February 1988. Follow-up included a post-card reminder to each member and a letter to state representatives asking them to encourage members to complete the survey. Because of budget limitations the second follow-up questionnaire mailing to those who did not respond was omitted. The questionnaire was a 12-page booklet design suggested by Dillman (1978).

Included in the questionnaire were 20 questions soliciting member opinion about the *Quarterly*. Of these, eight questions focused on the proposed *Quarterly* policy changes. Additional questions in the survey related to other issues such as membership participation in ACE, opinions about the Special

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Interest Groups and about actions ACE could take to more closely meet membership needs and expectations. Findings not related to the *Quarterly* will be reported elsewhere.

Results

Of the 602 members who received the questionnaire, 305 or 50.6% returned a completed survey. Similar studies of other audiences—both professional and public studies—have received response rates from 60 to 80%. The major difference with this study was that the follow-up questionnaire mailing was excluded. Had funds been available for that mailing, it is likely that response would have reached 75% or more. While a response rate of 50% is respectable, it is important to examine the extent to which those responding represent the total membership.

While exact statistics of membership are not available for comparison, those responding do appear to represent a wide range of member interests, ages, and specialties. Members responding to the study ranged in age from 23 to 84, (mean age was 47) had been ACE members from 1 year to 52 years, (mean was 13 years) and had responsibilities ranging from administrative (24%) to interactive video (1%). Eighty-two percent of those responding were regular members, 13% were retired and 3% were associate members. Of the regular members responding 4% were international members. Thus, it appears safe to conclude that responses will be representative of the large membership.

The *Quarterly*

Overall, readership of the *Quarterly* was moderate: 7.3% said they never read any of the *Quarterly*; 15% said that they usually look only at the titles of articles; 24% reported that they read at least part of one article in each issue and 36% said that they usually read between 1 and 4 articles in each issue. Nearly 17% said they usually read all of each issue of the *Quarterly*.

What is perhaps the most disturbing finding of the study is related to how ACE members evaluate the "quality" of the *Quarterly*. Only 42% of those responding believe that the *Quarterly* is a "quality" publication (respondents used their own definition of "quality"). On the other hand, nearly 68% said that they expect ACE to provide a quality publication (see Table 1). Of those who said that they expect a quality publication, only 30% said the *Quarterly* is that "quality publication." In addition, only half of the members regard the *Quarterly* as a "useful" publication. Said another way, one-half of all ACE members do not regard the *Quarterly* as a useful publication!

With such findings, it seems clear that ACE is missing an opportunity to meet membership needs through its publication. While this is true for all members, it is especially true for those who aren't able to participate in such activities as regional or national meetings (only 51% reported attending a national meeting in the past 5 years). For these individuals, the *Quarterly* offers a potentially important link if it can better address their needs.

Despite these negative findings about how members view the *Quarterly*, there are some very positive findings. Overall, ACE members strongly favor the proposed *Quarterly* changes outlined by King and Donnellan. Following are brief descriptions of those findings.

Table 1. Expectations of the *Quarterly* vs. Beliefs of Present Quality.

Expect This From the <i>Quarterly</i>	Belief That the <i>Quarterly</i> Offers This			Percent of All Members (Expectations)
	Quarterly is Not a Quality Publication	Not Sure	Quarterly is a Quality Publication	
Don't expect a quality publication	1.9%	1.9%	.8%	4.6%
Somewhat expect a quality publication	4.5	12.5	10.9	27.9
Definitely expect a quality publication	17.3	20.0	30.3	67.6
Total (Delivery)	23.7	34.4	42.0	100%

*All tables are based on 305 responses.

1. Member support for a peer reviewed journal is high. More than 69% of those responding agreed or strongly agreed that all articles in the *Quarterly* should be peer-reviewed. Of those disagreeing that all articles be peer-reviewed, only 3% *strongly* disagreed and 20.9% disagreed. (See Table 2). In fact, 33% of members said that the proposed changes will make it more likely that they will submit articles to the *Quarterly*, while only 4.6% said they were less likely to submit as a result of these changes. Sixty-one percent said the changes didn't make any difference.

In addition, it is clear that members are not interested in reading materials written only by other ACE members: 80% said the *Quarterly* should be open to submissions from anyone as long as the content relates to member interests.

2. Members favor an editorial board made up of SIG representatives and othe members who have high interest in the *Quarterly*. Table 3 shows that of the choices provided, 31.8% favor a combination of SIG representatives and those with a high interest in the *Quarterly*. A number do, however, favor leaving the editorial board made up of only SIG representatives or a board made up of only those "with high interest" in the *Quarterly*.

Table 2. Respondent agreement with proposed changes in the *Quarterly*.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
All articles should be peer reviewed	29.6%	38.4%	20.9%	3%	6.7%
<i>Quarterly</i> should include graphics and photos	26.1	53.5	11.7	1.7	6.7
More funds need to be provided to improve <i>Quarterly</i>	24.0	41.0	19.0	1.3	14.3
More briefs and highlights should be published	18.3	34.7	29.0	1.7	16.0

Table 3. Respondent opinion about the structure of the *Quarterly Editorial Board*.

New board should be . . .	Percent
Same as current structure	28.1%
Recognized leaders/experts	16.7
SIG representatives	4.0
Those with high interest in <i>Quarterly</i>	7.5
Some combination of SIG Representatives and those with high interest in <i>Quarterly</i>	31.8
Some other choice	7.3

3. Members indicate high interest in a wide range of content possibilities.

Table 4 shows that more than one-third of all members express high interest in seven of the nine areas listed. Of highest interest were articles dealing with evaluation of communication activities, "how-to" articles such as description of teaching techniques or a method of using a computer in a unique way; also of interest were analysis articles such as those that discuss the impact of new communication technologies.

Of least interest were texts of addresses given at ACE meetings (10.4% were very interested), and reviews of computer hardware and software (29% were very interested).

Members who reported higher participation in all aspects of ACE indicated greater interest in articles reporting "how-to" and research findings. At the other extreme, newer members were least supportive of publication of addresses given at ACE meetings.

Table 4. Member Interest in Potential *Quarterly* Article Content.

	Very Interested	Somewhat Interested	Not Interested
Evaluation of communication activities	49.0%	43.6%	7.4%
How-to articles	48.3	43.2	8.4
Analysis articles	48.0	42.6	9.4
Survey articles (literature reviews etc.)	46.8	43.8	9.4
Research findings	38.6	49.6	12.4
Opinion or personal experience articles	37.6%	49.5%	12.9%
Reviews of books or articles	36.9	51.7	11.4
Reviews of computer hardware and software	29.3	45.1	25.6
Texts of addresses given at ACE meetings	10.4	53.2	36.5

4. Members support the use of more graphics and photographs in the *Quarterly*. Support for a visual change in the *Quarterly* was even stronger than was support for most other changes. Seventy-nine percent of members either agreed or strongly agreed that the *Quarterly* should contain graphics and photos, and 65% agreed that more funds should be provided to support these changes.

Conclusions

It is difficult to examine the results of this study without coming away with the impression that ACE members are ready for some major changes in the *Quarterly*. Members appear to be unhappy with the *Quarterly* as it has been, and their support for the changes suggest that there is an expectation that the changes will help the *Quarterly* better meet member needs for a "quality" professional publication.

References

- Donnellan, L. (1987). ACE Quarterly Makes Changes, *The Quarterly*, 70(3), 3-7.
- Dillman, D.A. (1978). *Mail and Telephone Surveys*, New York: John Wiley & Sons.

NOTES:

Funding for this study was provided by the ACE Board of Directors. Members of the ACE Long-Range Planning Committee assisted in the development and design of the study. It was implemented by the Department of Communication, Cornell University.

