



Letter to the editor

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Grace periods for electronic journals subscription renewals

This year has seen a new problem emerge in the administration of subscriptions. Some customers who renewed their subscriptions to a printed journal, with an electronic version as part of the subscription, found their access rights terminated on December 31 – even though they had renewed and paid through their agent in good time. This happened in spite of the fact that both customer and agent had followed all the publishers' instructions on renewals and provided the necessary information. The paper subscription was unaffected.

It appears that for a number of publishers there is insufficient time to update the electronic access system before December 31, after updating the subscription system once the renewal has been received. This is the case even when the renewals are automated and provided electronically.

This is probably just another teething problem with electronic journals whose administration is still quite new to all of us. However, it does seem as if we could all learn a thing or two from the print world where this problem also occurs. Here the answer is to 'grace' the first few issues of each year to enable customers to receive continuity of service and the publisher to catch up with the large numbers of subscriptions, all coming in during the last part of the year or early in the new year. For electronic journals gracing the first few 'issues' is relatively easy and, what is more, should cost little or nothing (unlike print where the first few issues of the year had greater print runs and resulted in issues being posted to non-renewals). With electronic journals there are no costs of distribution. All that it requires, for

example, is the cut-off date being changed from December 31 to February 28. Since the overwhelming majority of subscribers do renew each year, the number receiving content without paying will be small (just as it was for paper).

This would actually save us all money and time. There would be fewer claims relating to access termination than previously, which would result in far fewer calls and letters from agents and customers, to all of which the publisher must respond. As a result, there would be far more happy subscribers who could use the time saved to concentrate on providing their service to users, thereby helping to increase usage. In addition, agents would have less work to do at a busy time of the year, resulting in better service to their customers and suppliers. A win, win, win situation! All it takes is a two-month grace period for subscribers on renewals to electronic journals!

The ASA is therefore calling on all publishers to examine their systems and see if they could introduce this change for the coming subscription year – you will save on administration and your customers will much appreciate it!

The ASA will be pleased to publicise such good practice by putting up all publishers gracing their electronic journals renewals on our website (www.subscription-agents.org).

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Secretary General

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