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EDITOR'S NOTES

Desk Rejection: How to avoid being hit by a returning Boomerang

Manuscripts are desk rejected when they do not fit the mission of the journal or are too underdeveloped to benefit from the review process. In such cases, two members of the editorial team go through the manuscript and provide a developmental letter to author or authors to advance the article further. This helps free up the time of editors and reviewers to concentrate on the most promising manuscripts (Sharma, 2010, p. 5).

Desk rejection is something that most scholars experience at sometime during their career. The stories of woe are commonplace in conference hotel bars, campus coffee shops and faculty photo-copy room conversations and reactions are shared in colourful language in various post rejection emails and phone calls among disenchanted authors. This article contributes to this discourse and in so doing continues a series of editor's notes aimed at reflecting on issues of importance to Family Business Review (FBR) readers and contributors. To date, the editorials from the current editorial team have addressed (1) publishing your qualitative research (Chenail, 2009), (2) the craft of reviewing (Sharma & Kellermanns, 2009), and (3) strengthening your literature review (Reuber, 2010).

In preparation for this article, I first surveyed colleagues to establish whether their desk rejection experience mirrored mine. It was cathartic to discover that they did. Though the intention here is not to present a definitive explanation of the role of desk rejection in the journal submission process (see, Ahlstrom, 2010; Bernard, 1990; Cherkashin et al., 2009; Gans & Shepherd, 1994; Rynes, 2006), my straw poll of colleagues, further reflection on my role as

an editor, and ongoing discussions did present me with enough material to develop a timely note. By timely I mean that, given there is an increase in the number of articles being submitted to our journal, it is timely that authors are reminded that with this increased activity comes an increased chance of rejection, and this includes desk rejection.

My personal reflections as an author and an editor below are followed by observations built around the rejection criteria adopted by FBR editors. The rigorous two editorial desk approach introduced by the FBR editorial team is shared with the intent that authors in the future will avoid having their paper returned sooner than expected. Throughout, I liken this process to when a returning boomerang is thrown and returns to the thrower. The returning boomerang is a throwing stick used for thousands of years by the Australian Aboriginals for hunting. It travels in an elliptical path and returns to its point of origin when thrown correctly. A returning boomerang has uneven arms or wings, so that the spinning is lopsided to curve the path. A returned boomerang (in this case, a submitted manuscript) means that the thrower of the boomerang (i.e., author) has not been effective in hitting the target at which they had aimed (i.e., getting passed the editors' desk) and the boomerang ends up back in their hands only to be thrown again at the same or different target.

Personal Reflections as an Author

I was never actually told there was something called a *desk rejection* until I received one. Maybe that was just the senior scholars who were responsible for guiding my development not wanting me to know that they were fallible, or maybe, in fact, they had never been desk rejected. I will never know. So, when it happened it was somewhat of a shock to be informed that, not only did the editor dislike my/our toil, he disliked it sufficiently to circumvent its progress through the review process. I vividly recall my co-

author's (whose office was adjacent to mine) response as he yelled "at least he bothered to read it" (*expletives* deleted). I soon gleaned from this seasoned veteran of multiple desk rejects that by including detailed comments in his rejection letter, the editor was actually doing us a favour.

Reflection 1: A desk reject decision can be looked at in a positive way

In my case, and no doubt in many others, when an editor takes the time to substantiate how and why he/she has reached their decision to stop your paper in its tracks, they are actually doing you a favour. A well crafted desk rejection letter either draws attention to glaring flaws or explains why your paper is not a good fit with the aspirations of the journal. Subsequent investigations with colleagues have supported this and, as was noted by an economics professor down the hall, there are some benefits: "Typically desk rejections are very quick (their one saving grace)." Timely response to a journal submission, even if it is an outright non-negotiable rejection, which is accompanied by a letter outlining substantive reasons for the decision, means that authors have options either to move the paper to a more appropriate outlet or address the shortfalls substantially and resubmit a 'new' paper (for a guide as to what substantiates a new paper, see Ireland, 2009).

My second reflection relates to something my mentor (aka "The Sage") has stressed to me countless times: "the single most cited reason for rejection is that a paper has been submitted prematurely to a journal". Another way to state this is that the manuscript is 'undercooked' as authors seemingly have a propensity to rush papers into the review process. Reasons for this are many but, as one colleague commented: "Whether to remain academically qualified or to secure tenure, the pressure is on us to publish and this is a contributing factor to sending papers out too early which results in some instances to a desk rejection".

***Reflection 2: Desk rejection is an outcome of premature submission
brought about by many factors including pressure to publish.***

Merely submitting a manuscript does not change much. In fact, the paper has just been moved to someone else's *in-tray* or *to-do* list. If the paper is not adequately prepared it is likely to behave like a boomerang that missed the intended target i.e., it comes flying back to you sooner than you expect.

Personal Reflections as an FBR Editor

So, now if I put on my FBR editor's hat, what is different? Quite a lot is the simple answer. As editors we feel charged to use our precious reviewers' time most efficiently while helping as many authors as possible – all with the aim to better understand the unique dynamics of family enterprises. I did not previously understand the challenges involved in protecting and managing reviewers and this is something that I assume changes for all academics who become editors. So, yes, my feelings towards desk rejection changed when viewing this from an editor's standpoint than when on the receiving end as an author. As it turns out, I was somewhat relieved to find out that FBR associate editors' decisions are made easier because the editor-in-chief checks for five criteria (detailed below) before assigning us as the action editor. So, in reality, the paper has to clear two desks, not one.

***Reflection 3: At FBR a desk rejection decision is the result of a rigorous
two stage process***

A manuscript is rejected by the FBR editorial desk(s) because the paper either (1) is a poor fit with FBR's mission, (2) does not build or test theory, (3) does not build on any previous FB research, (4) has nothing to do with family firms, or (5) does not adhere to FBR guidelines.

Reflection 4: An FBR desk rejection can be avoided if authors understand and address the criteria guiding editors' decisions.

Avoiding Being Desk Rejected

So, how then do we minimize being hit by a returning boomerang? Obviously, if the paper addresses the five criteria above, the paper will pass the 'first desk'. But how can the chances of passing the 'second desk' be increased? The aim of this section is to shed light on the heuristics I, in hindsight, have somewhat clumsily developed, and which have been loosely ratified by other more seasoned editors with whom I have discussed this topic. Let me first include a caveat that this is not going to guarantee your paper will not be desk rejected, but, it is my and the editorial team's hope that your chances of clearing both editorial desks is increased.

Firstly, I am sure editors who are assigned a paper that has passed the first desk do not take too much notice of the *Title* of the paper as this can be easily massaged or word-smithed and often is by reviewers as/if the paper evolves and proceeds through the review process. An inadequate or inappropriate title is not a big deal so I and other action editors would typically focus our initial attention on the *Abstract*.

The *Abstract* must address and clearly define the 3Ps i.e., the *Purpose* of the paper, the *Procedures* undertaken, and the *Principal* findings. Variations of this approach exist of course (see Huff, 1999, for a comprehensive overview) but if you can grab the attention of the reader by making it easy for them to engage in your objectives by clearly tabling your 3Ps

you have cleared this initial hurdle. Like an Executive Summary of a Business Report or Business Plan, the *Abstract* signals to the reader that your hard work is worthy of consideration. If it is too verbose you reduce the impact and if it is too parsimonious you risk underselling or inadequately signalling your contribution. Abstracts are not easy to craft and writing succinctly to capture so much detail is difficult, as was evident in Mark Twain's sentiments when he wrote to a friend that "*I was going to write you a short letter but I didn't have time*".

Observation 1: A well crafted Abstract that clearly states the purpose of the paper, the procedures undertaken, and the principal findings sends a clear positive signal to the action editor responsible for deciding whether to desk reject the manuscript.

The editor then moves their attention to the manuscript and expects authors to capture their attention in the first three paragraphs (or thereabouts). Failing to do this is not a reason for desk rejection but we really need to understand what it is that the authors are trying to achieve, what is new, how well they have thought this through and using crude metrics whether this paper is of a similar or better standard than other papers that have appeared in FBR recently...or whether it has the potential to achieve this status by building on existing conversations (Huff, 1999). Though not a deal breaker, I, and the majority of FBR reviewers I would suspect, like to see a research question included in the opening section. I also like to be 'hit over the head' with the theory on which the paper has been formulated, but that again may be a personal preference (see, Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Sharma et al., 2007). Given the vastness of the family business field, a clear link to an accepted family business definition is also enlightening. I find I usually read the opening section while simultaneously flicking to the References to confirm that what would be considered as the foundational

works in the area covered by the paper have been included by the authors. Again, all important signals that are decision influencers.

Observation 2: The theoretical contribution of the paper must be clearly evident to the editor and must clearly demonstrate how the paper builds on previous family business research.

The *Literature Review* IS a deal breaker. As eloquently outlined by my fellow editor Rebecca Reuber in an earlier edition of this series, the literature review signals the “fit” between the research and the journal (Reuber, 2010). I would recommend that if you haven’t done so, you refer to this article as you prepare your FBR manuscript submission. The Literature Review must lead the reader to the hypotheses or the propositions and when it does not, the chances of a desk reject begin to increase. However, an inadequate literature review can be addressed and not kill the project if the idea is novel and/or the dataset used to test the hypotheses/propositions is attractive to the editor. One of my frustrated fellow Associate Editors reflected on inadequate literature reviews when he sent me a related insight to include in this article: “Small business is not equal to family business. Some papers do not even use the word family.”

Observation 3: The Literature Review section is a potential deal breaker and must clearly signal how the paper contributes to existing conversations.

Manuscripts, whether quantitative or qualitative, need to pass methodological muster or they will likely be returned. This is where the fatal flaw, if there is one, will probably reside and, if the ‘first desk’ has missed it, the ‘second desk’ will likely not, if in fact he/she has been convinced in previous sections that your work clearly has the potential to be

published in FBR. There are flaws in all papers (thankfully) and in my experience the reviewing community is tolerant of these...to a point. One colleague provided this insight: “How do I prevent this (desk rejection) from happening – make sure I see articles that are published in the journal so I am sure that my stuff reasonably fits; ask colleagues if the article would fit a particular journal; and work hard at making the article sound interesting even if I know that the method and or results aren’t perfect.”

If the paper does pass the two desks it is likely that the editor is going to assign a (empirical or case study) technician to the reviewing team, so it makes sense to be cognizant that any technical flaws be identified and addressed prior to submission. This, I think, is where the importance of ‘road-showing’ papers prior to submission decreases the chances of a desk reject. So the recommendation is to seek input (aka *tough love*) from colleagues and take the time to consult leaders in the field at conferences and other forums. In my experience they are usually very generous with their time and really do not mind being approached. FBR editors are now available for scheduled meetings at AOM, EIASM, FERC, and IFERA.

Observation 4: Getting objective informed input on your paper will decrease the chances of a desk reject decision.

By now, if like me, the ‘second desk’ editor has likely made up their mind whether to reject your manuscript and typically (though I am making assumptions here) won’t spend too much time on the Discussion and Implications section as this can be relatively easily addressed if the ‘front-end’ is sound. However, if they are like me, they will have made mental notes about the writing style, the use of grammar and the attention to detail evident in the formatting of the paper and that it is consistent with the submission guidelines for FBR. This again, though not related to content of the paper, is a signal to the decision-maker that the authors are vested in the process and adhere to fundamental protocols. This applies to the

Reference List as well. Going to the trouble to adhere to the journal formatting guidelines may help you if the decision is 'line-ball'.

In sum, editors are looking to accept not reject papers (Reuber, 2010; Sharma, 2009) but the onus is on authors to do whatever they can to clear the two editorial desks. This can be achieved by ensuring that there is a strong fit with FBR's mission, the paper either builds or tests theory, the paper builds on any previous FB research conversations, the paper clearly has everything to do with family firms, and the submitted manuscript adheres to FBR guidelines. The likely outcome will be that your boomerang hits the intended target, not you.

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