Improving Your Graphics: Judging Quality, and Fixing it Too!

MODERATOR:
Brit Stamey
Client Manager and Senior Copy Editor
J&J Editorial
Cary, North Carolina

SPEAKERS:
Mike Vanderberg
Senior Technical Support Specialist
Sheridan Journal Services
Spotsylvania, Virginia

Eric Pesanelli
Editorial Art Manager
American Physiological Society
Bethesda, Maryland

REPORTER:
Brit Stamey

Editorial offices often deal with graphics peripherally, but they may not have hands-on experience with them. This session aimed to provide editorial offices and production professionals with information about how to determine figure quality, the best ways to fix problems, applications that can be beneficial, and a general understanding of figures and graphics to help better communicate with authors about quality.

Mike "V" Vanderberg, who has been working with graphics and prepress services since 1998, started off by explaining the difference between vector and raster, and how that can relate to file types. The edges of vector images will remain smooth no matter how much the image is enlarged, while raster images are pixelated and become more pixelated when enlarged. The highest quality image types are vectors and are usually pdf, ai, or eps files. High-quality raster images may still be acceptable for some purposes, and the most likely file types are tif or png. Authors should be asked to provide pdf file types because they will likely be the easiest for production to work with and result in the best quality images.

Eric Pesanelli, who has been with American Physiological Society (APS) Publications since 1992, started off by speaking about how much the industry has changed since he started out—not only regarding changes in file types, but also the change from physically cutting and pasting graphics for publication. On the same subject of file types that Mike spoke about, Eric elaborated that even with preferred file types like pdf and tif, APS often sees low-resolution raster images within those file types. Eric stressed that when encountering these low-resolution files it is important for the editorial and production offices to consider time versus quality: Would it be faster to fix it in house or better to send it back to the author? Are there time and resources available to fix it in house? Is it feasible to wait for the authors to send their file back, or is it more important to keep the paper moving through production?

These are all things that need to be considered when encountering graphics, but Eric also stressed pushing back on the authors. It is important to have them address some of these issues themselves, and it is also important that the author guidelines are clear about which file types are preferred or allowed. Eric and Mike both recommend using .pdf, .eps, or .ai file types, which typically have the best chance of high resolution and will be the easiest to fix in house if necessary.

From their presentations and the lively Q&A that followed, the recommendations of both Mike and Eric centered on how we communicate with authors. For the editorial office in particular, revising author guidelines to better inform authors about what file types to use, and laying out clear directions for the process if the graphics do not meet those standards, help both the authors and the journal by keeping the workflow on track. They both also had some great recommendations about file types and figure resolution (including a demonstration from Mike about the difference between quality and resolution). Given that journal offices often operate with limited time and resources, revising author guidelines and directions can save the office and authors time and frustration in the long run.