

From editors abroad into businesswomen back in Brazil

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Abstract

After living for 12 years in the United States, and a career shift from bench scientist in molecular biology to science writer and editor, the author goes back home to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to found Publicase, a science communication company specialised in health sciences, biology, and biomedicine. This article discusses what the author learned on the way about the challenges, opportunities, and rewards of creating and growing Publicase.

Keywords: Scientific writing, Science communication, Brazil

When I chose to major in biological sciences back in 1988, I had no idea that the knowledge I would gain while pursuing masters and PhD degrees, followed by a 2-year post-doc training at the National Institutes of Health, would be crucial in making me who I am today: the CEO of a small company specialising in scientific communication in Brazil. Publicase (<http://www.publicase.com.br>) was founded in 2008 upon my return to Brazil after living in the United States for 12 years.

The journey I took, which began with endless hours among a myriad of tiny PCR tubes in labs in Brazil and continued in the United States, culminating in my finally creating a niche away from the laboratory bench, is described in an article published in *Science Careers* entitled 'Beach, Bench, and Beyond'.¹ What I have to share here is some of what was waiting for me *beyond* life at the bench.

At Publicase, we edit and review papers, do translations, write press releases, and teach hands-on workshops on how to elaborate a research paper. At first, it was just two of us. We were former lab researchers who also had significant editorial experience. While I held a position in the editorial department of *Science Magazine* at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, my partner Andrea Kauffmann-Zeh was a Senior Editor at *Nature* for six years. Now we are a group

of 10 people including editors and workshop instructors.

Since 2008, we have faced many challenges at Publicase. Our first obstacle was to convince an initially reluctant scientific community that non-native English speakers like ourselves could teach how to elaborate and write research papers in English. We had to challenge the belief that only a native English speaker is capable of doing a good edit of a paper written in English, a belief that is both unjustified and unethical. It is unjustified because being a native speaker offers no guarantee of good writing. It is unethical because it assumes the existence of a level of 'excellence' in English that cannot be acquired by a non-native English-speaking editor and which only those who are born in English-speaking countries are granted the privilege to claim.

How then to transform biologists-turned-editors into businesswomen? Neither of us had any formal training in business. Everything we know today we have learned along the way. First, we needed a mission for Publicase. What did we want our company to accomplish? We defined our mission as *helping increase the visibility of Brazilian science in the international scenario*. Next, we defined the type of service we would offer. To provide a service that is useful and helpful, an editor working with authors for whom English is not their first language needs to combine many skills. This frequently requires the editor to be involved in a way that goes far beyond simply editing the paper. It is not uncommon at Publicase to find ourselves teaching authors how to build each section of the research paper, indicating flaws in how controls are presented, or pointing out all the spots in the text where a reference should be added to indicate the source of scientific evidence.

Indeed, a recent book published in Brazil² shows that it is not the English language but a lack of a clear understanding of the scientific discourse and how research projects should be carried out that

are the main obstacles for researchers in Brazil in attaining a better publication record. Thus, at Publicase we are *multifunctional editors* – we are teachers, sometimes writers, and very frequently translators. All these skills are necessary to achieve our main goal: to help authors to get published.

To assume the role of a *multifunctional editor*, some level of knowledge in the field of study of the research paper is necessary. Being ourselves trained as biologists, we have limited our scope to papers in health sciences, biology, and biomedicine.

Explaining to a prospective client that we are not a translation company or a company that ‘reviews the English’ has been an additional challenge. When prospective clients ask us why we cannot work on their physics or chemistry research papers, we offer the following explanation: for the same reason McDonald’s does not sell hot-dogs. In other words, limiting our scope to the health sciences, biology, and biomedicine was a business decision we made in order to ensure a unified, specialised, well-recognised product.

Besides deciding to work only within our areas of expertise, another important decision in our business model was to focus on the scientific community of Portuguese-speaking countries. We believe that good editing of a scientific paper written by a non-native English speaker requires the editor to be able to recognise the author’s original voice in order to grasp all the subtlety originally intended by the author. Thus, our website is available only in Portuguese for a reason.

In Brazil, most of our clients are government-owned universities and research institutes. Having the Brazilian government as our main client has been both our most exciting challenge and our biggest nightmare because of its size and the endless bureaucracy associated with hiring a small company like us. Working with the Brazilian

government offers many challenges, mainly because the person who hires us, usually a university professor, is not the person responsible for paying us and in many cases the communication between the two is very poor and prone to misunderstandings. Additionally, we are frequently asked to issue our invoice in advance in order to trigger a long payment process (it can take up to 90 days) for services we have not yet provided. In Brazil, once the invoice is issued, 16% tax is due in the next billing cycle, which is never longer than 30 days. Thus, on many occasions, we pay taxes for a service we have not yet provided or been paid for.

With more than 50 workshops already scheduled for 2013, we certainly need help to keep organised and on track. To this end, we have relied on a number of free tools available on the Internet, mainly those provided by Google. Tools such as Google Forms and Google Docs have delivered more than we could have asked for and have allowed us to do our business from our home offices, each one located in a different city in the world.

In hindsight, my going back to Brazil in 2007 was definitely the right move. In the United States I would most likely have become one more freelancer desperately searching for jobs and opportunities. In Brazil, I feel that I make a difference – I know that the services that my company offers have helped researchers to get published, thus increasing the visibility of Brazilian science.

References

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Author information

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