

Don't be misled by citation figures! (6)

Bad Timing

The field was as "hot" as could be. Whoever succeeded in publishing an up-to-the-minute revelation about angiogenesis in one of the high profile journals would most definitely be cited tremendously. A few hundred citations during the following two to three years were the usual numbers at the time.

Van Hoven, a young group leader, was on the brink of such a "blockbuster". The results were new, concise and "watertight". The manuscript had been sent off to *Nature* just the day before. In his mind's eye van Hoven already envisioned the citation numbers climbing up the database week after week. Times cited: 23, ... Times cited: 78, ... Times cited: 145, ... Times cited: 238, ...

However, there was one thing that caused him a slight headache. Rockman, the grand old man and pioneer of angiogenesis research from Berkeley, had called him just four weeks previously. He had explained that he was writing a review for *Cell* and that he just wanted to make sure he was including the most recent results and knowledge. "You know, the field is moving at high-speed. Is there anything new in the pipeline from your lab?"

he had asked. "Perhaps something you can tell me in advance of publication? Or even send me a draft? You know the business; it always takes a lot of time until a review finally appears."

Van Hoven had been bowled over by such an honour. He hadn't imagined that Rockman would even know of him. The same Rockman who, in the last ten years, had been one of the hottest candidates for an exquisite December evening in Stockholm. Still dizzy from

so much appreciation van Hoven had instantly gone to his computer and sent the manuscript to Rockman – with "best regards".

Unexpectedly, the *Nature* publication turned out to be a pain in the behind. Van Hoven didn't hear anything from them for an unusually long time and eventually the reviewers demanded some additional data for proper publication. Pure bullying, van Hoven was ranting! However, what could he do? It took him two months to complete the "superfluous" work. Also he became so angry that conspiracy theories began to materialise in his mind. "Could Rockman perhaps...? Sure enough, he's influential ... On the other hand... No, nonsense – he's just retired...!"

Four months later, when van Hoven finally read his article in *Nature*, his anger was immediately blown away. Now the balance on his personal citation account would start to rocket sky-high – no doubt about it. Two months later he counted 18, not bad for such a short period of time. After four months he was at 26 ... errm, well. Another two months later the database showed him still only 32 citations. What was the matter?

Rockman's review had appeared. Unexpectedly early and only two months after van Hoven's article. The review contained all of van Hoven's key data and conclusions. These, however, were now obviously cited from Rockman's review. Who had even heard of van Hoven anyway, despite his *Nature* paper?

Two years later the Rockman review was floating towards 600 citations, whilst van Hoven's original research article still languished below 60.

RALF NEUMANN



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Kai Herfort, Ralf Neumann, Hubert Rehm

Office:

Alte Straße 1, 79249 Merzhausen, Germany

Tel.: +49 (0)761-28 68 69; Fax: +49 (0)761-3 57 38

Management: Kai Herfort, Tel: +49 (0)761-28 68 69

Editor-in-chief: Ralf Neumann, Tel.: +49 (0)761-29 25 884

Editors: Kai Herfort, Winfried Köppelle, Hubert Rehm, Harald Zähringer

E-mail: editors@lab-times.org

Reporters:

Brynja Adam-Radmanic, Siegfried Bär, Silke Blohm, Susanne Dorn, Rafael Florés, Karin Hollricher, Annette Hupfer, Ralf Schreck

Graphics and Pictures: Kai Herfort, Winfried Köppelle, Ulrich Sillmann

Design and Production Team:

Art Director: Ulrich Sillmann

Kai Herfort, Winfried Köppelle, Ralf Neumann, Harald Zähringer

Sales:

Advertising Manager: Bernd Beutel

Top-Ad Bernd Beutel

Hammelbacherstraße 30, 69469 Weinheim, Germany

Tel: +49 (0)6201-290 92-0

Fax: +49 (0)6201-290 92-20

E-mail: info@top-ad-online.de

Recruitment:

Ulrich Sillmann,

Tel: +49 (0)761-29 25 881, E-mail: jobs@lab-times.org

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