

# Pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and the media

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Pharmaceuticals and biotechnology are increasingly in the news. The *Financial Times's* (FT) Lexis-Nexis News database shows a sustained rise in the number of stories and articles about biotechnology in the FT over the past decade, from just 124 in 1991 to 1117 last year – almost a tenfold increase (Table 1). The number of articles in the FT about pharmaceuticals rose from 783 in 1991 to 3092 in 2000 (Table 2). *The New York Times*, the leading national newspaper in the USA, has also expanded its coverage of biotechnology and pharmaceuticals. Its biotechnology coverage grew from 339 articles in 1991 to 637 in 2000, with a peak in the early 1990s, and then a trough in the middle of the decade when biotechnology was going through a relatively dull patch, followed by strong growth from 1998 as the field began an exciting new run both scientifically and financially (Table 1).

This increase reflects the increased resources newspapers are having to put into covering the sector. At the beginning of the 1990s, the FT had only one specialist reporter covering the whole span of the chemical, pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries – me! Now there are half a dozen of us writing about pharmaceuticals and biotechnology. There is a similar pattern in the NYT's pharmaceuticals coverage (Table 2).

## Building relationships

At the same time, science and medicine have generally been attracting more media attention. Often, the stories appear in a form that anyone who really knows about the subject recognizes as grossly exaggerated, either as positive

stories in the time-honoured 'miracle cure' genre or as negative scare stories. However, whatever you think of journalists, you cannot ignore their impact. News stories, positive or negative, affect patient attitudes, research grants, shareholder satisfaction and much more besides. I do not know of any studies relating media coverage to long-term growth in shareholder value; indeed, it is hard to know quite how such research would be carried out, covering indirect effects such as the benefits of good publicity for staff recruitment. However, there are studies showing that media coverage of a corporate disaster, such as a food poisoning scare, has a short- to medium-term impact on the share price. Regardless of this, there is no way for a quoted company today to hide completely from the media, even if it wanted to.

No pharmaceutical company should look at its policy toward the media in isolation. It should be part of a wider, more open attitude to the outside world. The old secretive management styles are dying. In the age of the Internet and mass communications, it no longer makes sense to hoard information, only giving it out stingily like a Victorian miser with a bag of gold. The old practice – that you released as little information as you could get away with – must be replaced with a new rule: all information is freely available unless there is a compelling commercial or legal reason to keep it confidential.

In my experience of over 20 years in science and medical journalism, corporations in general have become steadily better in their approach to the media. By

**Table 1. Articles about biotechnology in the *Financial Times* (FT) and *New York Times* (NYT)**

Year	Number of articles	
	FT	NYT
1991	124	339
1992	225	394
1993	248	350
1994	433	280
1995	512	266
1996	603	254
1997	668	260
1998	837	363
1999	902	409
2000	1117	637

The figures give the total number of articles containing the word 'biotechnology' or 'biotech' in each year. Source: FT Lexis-Nexis database.

**Table 2. Articles about pharmaceuticals in the *Financial Times* (FT) and *New York Times* (NYT)**

Year	Number of articles	
	FT	NYT
1991	806	1217
1992	783	1188
1993	1692	1360
1994	1896	1165
1995	2231	1146
1996	2037	1222
1997	2122	1202
1998	2537	1442
1999	2543	1553
2000	3092	1824

The figures give the total number of articles containing the word 'pharmaceutical' or 'pharmaceuticals' in each year. Source: FT Lexis-Nexis database.

'better', I mean more open, responsive to journalists and proactive in their public relations policy. But there is still room for improvement.

In the overall context of corporate media relations, the most important thing is to build up a good long-term relationship with journalists. Make friends with them (although remember that good journalists will resist developing too cosy a relationship with any organization they cover regularly). Help journalists write stories about your company or research field. Feed them information, on and off the record. Then, when big news breaks – whether it is a crisis because your leading product fails in Phase III trials or a triumph when it receives FDA approval – the coverage will be more sympathetic. Although journalists do of course aim to make every story fair, accurate and balanced in its own right, it is human nature to write favourably about companies that are always friendly and open – and nastily about those with a reputation for secrecy or arrogance.

### Understanding journalists

Many people in pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries do not really understand the operating constraints on science or medical journalists in the mass media. The challenge that is often uppermost in the journalist's mind is not so much to get the scientific truth across to the reader or viewer, but rather to sell the story to the news editor or whichever other internal gatekeeper that the newspaper, magazine or TV programme employs. Remember that the media always has a vast oversupply of potential stories, even at slack periods like the Christmas and New Year lull or the August 'silly season'. If a story is worthy but not sensational enough, it might be ignored – or 'spiked' in journalists' jargon.

Personally, I would rather read a serious biomedical story than anything about the entertainment business or the

Royal family or most things about politics, but news editors have different values, even on serious newspapers, and a scare story about a new vaccine, for example, might tune in better with those values than a measured attempt to communicate the real risks and benefits of vaccination. Right or wrong, the mass media are about entertainment as much as information.

The process by which certain stories are picked up and run in the media, whereas others never get started, is chancy, even capricious. Coverage will depend on how many other stories are around on the day, and who happens to be on duty among the writing and editing staff. For example, a potential science story is less likely to make the pages of the FT if it crops up while I am on holiday rather than in the office!

### Where do the stories come from?

Journalists' sources fall into five broad categories:

- (1) Press releases and official announcements by mail, fax and e-mail arrive in gigantic quantities (and, sadly, being on many e-mail press lists does not seem to have reduced the amount arriving by post or fax). On a typical day I might receive 70 press releases as well as publicity materials such as corporate magazines – a pile of paper about half a metre high. The vast majority goes straight into the 40-gallon oil drums we use to collect waste paper.
- (2) Personal contacts by letter, phone or mail can give the best stories of all – those sought-after scoops and exclusives. However, we have to beware of the false exclusives. All too often, a public relations person rings up and says breathlessly: 'You can have this story all to yourself if you agree to run it prominently in the FT', when in fact it is so obscure that no one else will want it.
- (3) Visits to press conferences, scientific meetings, academic and industrial laboratories, and so on, will usually produce a worthwhile story. With

modern communications technology, it would be possible to work as a reporter without leaving the office, but I think it is essential to get out at least once a week to meet people and see how they work.

- (4) Papers in academic journals – *Nature*, *Science*, *The Lancet* and so on – are a vital source of news for science and medical journalists. The journals normally provide access to their most interesting papers a few days ahead of publication, on an embargoed basis, to give us time to prepare stories. (An embargo means that an organization gives out news in advance on condition that no one prints or broadcasts it before a specific time.) Because most leading journals are published on Thursdays and Fridays, more research-based news stories appear towards the end of the week than at the beginning. The most important source of embargoed information is a web-based service called Eurekalert, run by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, to which science journalists have access through a password-protected site.
- (5) Following up something in another paper or magazine, or on radio or television is the source that we like least, but that we often feel obliged to use. Once a story starts in one newspaper, it might develop what journalists call 'legs' and run in many others. (The advent of computer databases has made it much easier to follow up stories than it used to be in the old days of paper cuttings, but it means that an error in one newspaper is more likely to be imitated elsewhere.)

### What makes a good story?

Non-journalists often ask what attracts media attention – what makes a 'good story'? Unfortunately this is extremely hard to define for outsiders. You can list some attractive ingredients: sex; intrigue; corruption; death and disease; bizarre events; genuine scientific breakthroughs.

If someone does not want you to publish the story, that adds a frisson of excitement. Above all, a good story is unexpected. One test is 'guess what, Mum!' – is the story interesting enough to tell my mother about when I phone her for a chat?

I cannot over-emphasize the vast number of science stories that I could write, compared with my time and the space available for them in the paper. Given unlimited time and resources, I could write thousands more pieces than I actually do, and the longer I do the job, the longer grows my list of subjects to cover in the future.

However, let me go back now to look in a bit more detail at some of the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of media relations from the journalist's point of view. The first point is that companies should be more discriminating about what news they release. Although large pharmaceutical groups are suitably restrained in their behaviour, some young biotechnology companies (with impatient investors to placate) seem to suffer badly from press-release diarrhoea, feeling compelled to tell the world about every obscure appointment they make or licensing deal they conclude. They build up every commercial deal into a major strategic alliance – provoking one of my colleagues to remark recently that he wanted to put out a press release announcing a strategic alliance with his local supermarket because he shops there every week. We only want to hear about really important scientific, clinical, strategic or financial news.

Some public relations people are double offenders. They send a boring or unusable press release, and then they telephone, disturbing me on deadline, to check whether I have received it and need any further information. It is essential to reserve such phone calls for really truly important news and preferably to call as early in the day as possible (though this can be difficult for people in the USA calling London).

Another point, which is obvious but absolutely essential, is to make sure that press releases are written in a clear, concise, jargon-free style, explaining at the top what they are about. Although there are severe constraints from regulators such as the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) about what a quoted company must include in a statement and what it cannot say, these rules do not excuse deliberate obfuscation. Too many companies assume that everyone knows what their business involves. With thousands of companies and biomedical organizations out there clamouring for attention, a science journalist will almost certainly not be immersed in the technology of any individual company. It is no longer necessary to explain what DNA or the human genome or monoclonal antibodies are, but terms like 'albumin fusion technology' do need explanation.

Equally obvious, but frequently ignored (particularly by European companies), is the absolute necessity of making sure that if a release goes out with a contact name and phone number, someone will be there, ready to respond. Nothing is

more certain to put a journalist off a story than to receive a jargon-ridden press release and then, when he or she calls up for an explanation, to find that no one is available to respond until after the deadline time.

One of my pet hates is to receive a release giving clinical trial results that purports to come from an academic centre but, when read closely, is actually from a PR agency working for a pharmaceutical company. I regard it almost as deceitful for companies to bury their involvement in a project, in the hope that naïve journalists will be more likely to write about it if they think it is a university project.

However, I want to conclude on an encouraging note. I meet too many people in the pharmaceutical industry who have a defensive or negative attitude to the media – a feeling that the world in general, and journalists in particular, do not understand their good work and are 'out to get them'. In my experience, most journalists and their readers have a positive view of the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries. Please help the media to create an even more positive impression of your industry.

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