

Ready, aim, fire: the art of biotech publicity



'We must be ready to connect with our audience's values and concerns through careful listening.'

Dan Eramian, Vice President of Communications, Biotechnology Industry Organization

When the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) conducts focus groups, some brave soul will inevitably pose the question, 'What, exactly, is biotechnology?' With the ice broken, others at the table share their own curiosity: Is it just DNA? Is it medical research? Cloning? As we in communications craft the answer to that fundamental, industry-defining question, we enjoy both an unusual opportunity (the chance to define ourselves before others do so) and exceptional risks (if we get it wrong, we will have to live with the consequences for decades).

After 25 years in communications and public affairs, here is the most important lesson I have learned: sometimes it is not the enemy that causes the most damage – sometimes it is our own disconnected, uncoordinated, ill-planned efforts that hurt us the most. We sometimes fire, aim, and get ready when we disseminate our message rather than taking the time to find out who our audiences are or what really makes them tick. A biblical verse is instructive: 'Be swift to hear, slow to speak' (*James 1: 19*). Too often we are too swift to speak and too slow, or even too stubborn or focused, to hear.

Learning from your audience

Let me share a couple of personal experiences at BIO to illustrate both the mistakes that can be made and the potential for success. In early 1995, a front-page *New York Times* story thrust BIO, then barely two-years-old, into the national spotlight. Nearly 200 religious leaders from almost every imaginable faith had signed a petition calling for the US government to place a moratorium on the patenting of genetic material.

We at BIO saw this as a bold challenge to our industry's scientific research and its ability to raise capital to continue that research. We had never heard of the group behind the petition – the Joint Appeal against Human and Animal Patenting (JAHAP) – and knew nothing of their motivations. So, we of course fired, aimed and got ready, and issued a strong rebuke to their crazy ideas to the press. We never bothered to learn about their values, beliefs, and fears about new technology, something we should probably have known through proper research even before they coalesced as a group to confront us.

We then spent the next several months writing to everyone who had signed the petition describing the consequences to medical research if patents were abolished. Those who replied said that they did not understand the connection between patenting genes and medical research, and some said that they did not care. They had signed the petition because they thought technology was moving too fast, that industry paid no attention to the moral or ethical questions that arise from new technology, and that this was one way to get the industry's attention. These are attitudes for which we should have been prepared. They reside in the collective values and beliefs of the public and its opinion leaders.

A few months later, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (Washington, DC, USA) asked BIO if we would be willing to participate in a dialogue on patents with members of JAHAP, academics and theologians. We agreed and for the next year participated in a series of all-day sessions to debate the topic of patents. I am not sure that any minds were changed in the end, but during the act of dialogue each side came away with a better understanding of, and tolerance for, the other side's views. JAHAP and others learned that biotechnology researchers do not 'sneak up' on people with a scalpel and a pair of tweezers to pull out a gene, put it into a jar and get a patent on it. Personally, I learned that sheer information, even unassailable messages about the benefits of medical research, is not enough to build a convincing message if we fail to take into account the audience's values.

BIO also learned that sometimes the language our industry uses can offend the very communities we are trying to reach. When researchers say they have found 'the fountain of youth', that we can genetically engineer life the way we

want it, or that we now have God's instructions for life, many religious leaders and fellow believers take great offence. They are acutely sensitive to the dangers of scientists 'playing God'. I am not sure I would have learned all of this from a national poll or through market-research interviews at the shopping mall.

Keeping your credibility

I can set the stage for my second example with a single word: Dolly. In February 1997, I picked up the *New York Times* and Dolly, the cloned sheep, was emblazoned across the front page. Clearly, this was the biggest biotechnology story of the decade.

We had no warning of this breakthrough, but I could imagine what the general public was thinking – more mad science out of control. Within an hour, the President of BIO, Carl Feldbaum, issued a statement to the media saying that although BIO applauded the scientific achievement, it was calling for a moratorium on the reproductive cloning of a human being. BIO even recommended criminal penalties for violators.

Now you might think making that statement was easy; not so. Some of our CEOs, who are scientists, criticized us for appearing to stand in the way of scientific advancement, which, in their view, should absolutely never be done. We countered, based in part on our previous experience with JAHAP, that society needs time to 'catch up' with new technology, and that not issuing the moratorium in this instance would surely have been an act of supreme deafness. That statement was simply the right thing to do, both ethically and strategically. It established the ethical credibility of BIO and the industry, which laid the essential

groundwork for BIO's recent recommendation that therapeutic applications of somatic cell nuclear transfer should be allowed to progress.

Since Dolly, BIO has established a Bioethics Committee to help it anticipate breakthrough scientific advances so that we can be better prepared to answer questions from the public and the media. BIO has also composed a Statement of Principles and expects members to abide by them.

Of course, we can proudly wave all these policy statements in front of the media, and say that we are moral people, but this is not enough. We have to continue building trust with our audience, and that takes a long-term, ongoing dialogue. At BIO, we are doing just that by conducting focus groups with deeply religious people, stepping up our grassroots media and political efforts, and launching a series of dialogues with religious leaders.

In short, we must be ready to connect with our audience's values and concerns through careful listening. Then, as we gain a more compassionate and sophisticated understanding of our public, we will be able to aim more persuasive communications, so that as we fire our messages, we strike our target of public acceptance and success in the marketplace.

Dan Eramian

*Vice President of Communications
Biotechnology Industry Organization
1625 K Street, NW
Site 1100
Washington DC, USA
tel: +1 202 857 0244
fax: +1 202 857 0237
e-mail: deramian@bio.org*

How do YOU think we could improve the communication of what we do with the public?

Have you recently been involved in any such communication with the public that went either very well or rather badly?

What can we all learn from these experiences?

Please send your comments to Dr Rebecca Lawrence, News & Features Editor, *Drug Discovery Today*
e-mail: rebecca.lawrence@drugdiscoverytoday.com

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