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Outreach: managers need to do it

This April, at the meeting of the Laboratory Animal Management Association, I will be codirecting a workshop for managers on how to effectively conduct public outreach. Outreach is essential to ensure continuing biomedical progress, and managers of laboratory animal facilities are in a particularly effective position to teach others about the work that they do. This is because they have authority and control over resources that allow them to share the importance of animal research with members of the public. But, point in fact, anyone who is associated with a vivarium should participate in outreach activities.

For most managers, many of their professional responsibilities involve working with people and using resources to make things happen. This makes them perfectly positioned to organize outreach opportunities within their institutions and to bring programs to places nearby. For example, managers can clear time for staff to give a presentation offsite. They can procure materials for the presentation, and they can encourage their staff as they prepare for the outreach. Managers can also make suggestions for improvements and ideas, based upon their own experiences.

Managers, in turn, can learn and grow through outreach. They can develop other skills that are indirectly related to the job. If giving the presentation, managers can build their résumés by sharing information through public speaking and gaining confidence in different circumstances. When arranging the outreach, managers can network and make new contacts that might be helpful at a later date. Managers can develop and apply many other talents through outreach, and they are likely to learn more about themselves through the process.

In a companion “Outreach” column in this issue of *Lab Animal*, Kim Benjamin, facilities manager at Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, recounts her personal story of engaging in outreach with local elementary schools. Kim’s column

describes a wonderful recipe for conducting outreach in a school environment. I would not call it a ‘standard operating procedure’ because outreach is not and should not be ‘standard’. Each opportunity is unique, has different objectives, and depends upon the circumstances.

When developing an outreach program, we can draw up its scope, goals and challenges by using one of my favorite training tools: the six ‘Ws’ (who, what, when, where, why and how).

Who? Anyone and everyone should do outreach, but here we focus on the managers of animal facilities, because they are uniquely disposed to share their work and resources with the public.

What? There are many kinds of outreach. I suggest that managers consult with the folks at one of the many organizations that support biomedical research (Table 1) to make use of their experiences, knowledge, materials and schedules of outreach opportunities.

When? Outreach can happen anytime, during dedicated or spontaneous events. Some wonderful opportunities include regional agriculture and science fairs, career days at schools, scouting (I myself taught chemistry and bird study for merit badges with the Boy Scouts), guest classroom presentations and many other occasions.

Where? We should do outreach wherever we can. Schools often welcome visitors who can share perspectives on the practical aspects or the scientific elements of animal care and use. Civic organizations for adults, particularly those with a business aspect, often need speakers for breakfast and lunch meetings. The community and everyone in it can be invited for tours and demonstrations within the facility (with proper authorization, of course).

Why? Simply put, we need to do outreach because the public doesn’t have access to information about lab animal facilities. I see this when I talk to my seatmate on an

TABLE 1 | Advocacy organizations for biomedical research

Foundation for Biomedical Research
American Association for Laboratory Animal Science
Americans for Medical Progress
States United for Biomedical Research
Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology
American Physiological Society
Society for Neuroscience
Northwest Association for Biomedical Research
Southwest Association for Education in Biomedical Research
California Biomedical Research Association
Massachusetts Society for Medical Research
New Jersey Association for Biomedical Research
North Carolina Association for Biomedical Research
Ohio Scientific Education and Research Association
Pennsylvania Society for Biomedical Research
Texas Society for Biomedical Research

airplane, or when I teach veterinary technician students at my university. It is amazing to me that educated people often do not understand how treatments and medicines for themselves and their pets come from biomedical research.

How? There is no single answer for how outreach can be accomplished. When doing outreach it is critical that we be creative, innovative and appropriate to the audience. If demonstrations are involved, it might be necessary to rehearse the scenario and have colleagues assist us. This can help us improve the presentation and potentially identify materials that we have forgotten.

Outreach is about providing resources and information to people who might not otherwise have access to that information. People who live and work outside our research institutions often do not have the opportunity to learn about what we do. It is important that we educate others through outreach, and managers are critical to this effort. The effort will, in turn, be rewarding to both the managers and the public.