



Good relations—PR for the biotech business

PR is an essential part of a biotechnology company's business strategy, but must be applied with caution
say Julia Phillips and Fiona Beckman

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conferences—when creating its own view of a company.

Potential partners. Almost without exception, biotechnology businesses rely on partnerships and collaborations for their growth. Partners look for innovative and effective tools and technologies, and/or complementary expertise in specific therapeutic areas. Positioning and differentiation are especially critical components in the communications strategy of the many “me-too” companies working in related areas. Prospective partners can be easily overwhelmed by solicitations from companies offering similar services, and profile-building is a key PR activity to help a company distinguish itself from the competition, enabling its business development team to get a foot in the partner's door.

Employees. Companies that are not well known have problems recruiting and keeping the best staff. Without people that are recognized and respected in their fields, companies can find it difficult, if not impossible, to build credibility for their business. Potential employees want to see the name of their employing company in the publications they read and the conferences they attend. They want to know that they will be working for a reputable organization with prestige and distinction in its field.

The public. As the outcry over genetically modified organisms has highlighted, the biotechnology industry ignores the public at its peril. Although great progress has been made in helping the public see the positive benefits of biotechnology, there is still much to do. Biotechnology companies must consider this when planning PR, ensuring that their key messages are accessible to the nonscientific audience. Obscure messages lead to confusion, or worse to fear of biotechnology.

The media. It is vitally important to communicate effectively with the media, frequently the means through which a company's target audience is influenced—for bet-

What's your message?

“Biotechnology is primarily a company's PR,”

but this is too vague and needs refining. First and foremost, it is essential for a company to identify its target audience, enabling the message to be tailored to meet the specific needs of that audience.

Biotechnology companies have a variety of audiences, including investors, potential collaborators, prospective employees, and, last but not least, the media.

Investors. Few biotechnology companies are financially self-sufficient, and investors are vital during all stages of their development. Investors want to see evidence of technological progress, management credibility, and ongoing investment in core technologies. The biotechnology investor audience is extremely sophisticated, drawing on numerous sources—for example, trade and financial press, websites, analyst reports, and

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ter or worse. Building relationships with key journalists can never guarantee good press, but recognition of the company's name will certainly help a company's press release stand out from the pile landing on an editor's desk or in their email inbox each day. It is especially important that companies with complex business models or technologies take the time to help explain the subtleties to editors and journalists. A poor understanding of the technology might fail to ignite a reporter's interest or, worse, result in poor-quality coverage. Companies find it incredibly frustrating to see their business inaccurately represented in an influential publication, painfully aware that opinion leaders are absorbing the wrong message.

Most biotechnology companies also believe that their communications efforts have a role to play in educating the public's perceptions of the industry, and this is a consideration that needs to come into play when planning messaging.

To ensure that the world receives a single clear message, the same themes and messages should run through all forms of communication—whether delivered by investor relations, PR, or marketing. For young biotechnology companies, investor relations, PR, and marketing are often carried out by the same team, resulting in a highly effective and integrated communication vehicle. For more mature companies, it can be more difficult to integrate the different functions to present a coordinated face to the world.

Plan ahead

Deciding on what stage a young company should start its PR campaign will depend on the objective of the communications—for example whether the goal is to raise funds, find partners, or recruit new staff—and the potential news flow over a given period. One of the most common mistakes made by fledgling companies is that they communicate "in isolation." For example, a company announces its creation, but it is then silent for the following 18 months; this is not the optimal use of their time and money. Once the time to start talking has been identified, it is critical for a company to keep its head above the parapet with a steady stream of news, or the company's voice will be drowned out by all the others clamoring for attention.

While a company is private it has a lot more freedom to time its communications for greatest impact, and this independence should be valued. Most biotechnology companies are anxious to get a stock market listing, oblivious to the restrictions that will

then apply to their communications efforts. Rules for different markets may vary, but the theme is the same: anything that could influence the share price (i.e., anything remotely interesting) must be publicly disclosed post haste. However, this is not always to the company's advantage, and can force communications with investors at less favorable moments.

A news flow and events calendar is an essential tool when putting together a communication plan. A calendar generally consists of, for example, potential news announcements, financial reporting dates (if relevant), planned patents and scientific

release about early-stage research results, companies still commit this sin more frequently than is good for the business. Ironically, the actual benefits can be limited: certain audiences tend to be very skeptical of scientific research that has not been peer reviewed. In particular, investors and journalists who have fallen prey in the past—for example, when early promising results did not hold up in later studies—will view a reluctance to publish through the recognized channels as an attempt to hide slightly dubious methodology.

Nevertheless, if the news is truly sensational, even the most skeptical

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publications, conference attendance and/or presentations, business travel for senior management, and corporate events. Each event should be examined for its potential as an opportunity to communicate the company's message. The exercise helps to identify patterns of potentially high and low activity, and spot the best PR opportunities during a given period.

Publish with caution

Biotechnology companies are among the most prolific breeding grounds for newsworthy ideas and great science. Innovation drives a large proportion of the company's value, and it is no surprise that management wants to tell the world about the latest "breakthrough". Unfortunately, the intellectual property minefield makes companies wary of publishing sensitive research through peer-reviewed channels, primarily because of the amount of detail they must provide for such publications. The inability to control the timing of a publication of science research in a journal is also a concern. "Publishing by press release," in which a company presents research results in brief through normal press release channels, often seems a more attractive option; the company not only gets to shout their news from the rooftops, but also has complete control over how much news is released.

However, publishing by press release has its dangers. First, the temptation to overstate the facts (or "hying" as it is known in less-polite circles) can be overwhelming. Although it is now rare to see the word "breakthrough" in the headline of a press

of science writers may be tempted to go for the tabloid-style headline on the front page. However, the moment of glory for the company in question can be fleeting: At the slightest suggestion of controversy, fair-weather media supporters will be the first to knock the company off its pedestal. If there is any hint of weakness within a planned announcement, a company must weigh up the perceived benefits against the potential damage from the announcement backfiring.

A second danger of "publishing by press release" is the effect on a company's scientific reputation among its peers: Academic collaborators will be displeased that non-peer-reviewed data have been used to boost a company's reputation at the expense of scientific integrity¹; external scientists working in the same field may resent being denied access to information with the potential to progress other important research². And prepublication of scientific data by press release often compromises the novelty of a company's work if submitted to top tier scientific publications.

Be media friendly

Although companies initially find telling their story to the world nerve-racking, when they become accustomed to the interplay with their audiences the whole process can become exhilarating and fun. In our experience, it is the media that strikes the greatest fear into the hearts of senior management, perhaps because they have seen their peers damned by the press for many of the reasons alluded to above. Media training is highly recommended for all company spokespeople.



Contrary to a widely held belief, media training is not simply about learning your lines and practicing how to avoid that difficult question. Media is also not about “controlling” the press—an impossible task. The objective is to better understand how the media works, and what a journalist is looking for from an interview. With some notable exceptions, most reporters are not out to trap the company into saying something that they might later regret, but they are looking for a printable story—one way or another. Here, a good PR consultant can serve a company well: PR professionals talk to reporters regularly and have insight into their interests and pet hates. By preparing a company spokesperson for the angle that a journalist is likely to take, and ensuring that the reporter gets the most appropriate story for his publication, an interview with the press is more likely to run smoothly and meet both parties’ expectations.

Get help

Young biotechnology companies vary greatly in their understanding of the function of PR, frequently depending on the collective

experience of their management team. For example, if the founding scientist is in his first commercial venture, then his view of PR might be equally underdeveloped. It may take several years before someone with significant commercial background joins the management team to offer his/her expertise. In the meantime, a company must decide whether to embark on PR alone, talk to a consultant and (hopefully) get some good advice, or to consider whether it is really worth spending time and resources on PR at such an early stage.

Once a company has decided that formal PR should be a part of the marketing mix, then it will need to weigh up the merits of handling the process in-house or retaining a PR consultancy. Many companies decide that they need both, and play around with the balance. Indeed, a mix of the two may be best. To do their best work, a consultant needs access to senior management on a regular basis, as well as a day-to-day contact for coordination and administrative purposes. Equally, an internal person may understand the technology and business strategy better than an out-

sider, but could find it difficult to view the company objectively. A competent PR consultancy can contribute invaluable experience to a company facing new situations, offering access to relevant industry contracts, and ensuring that a company’s name is heard by its publics.

Biotechnology, with its complex science and growing public awareness, needs good-quality PR to relay positive messages to its audiences and avoid the potential misunderstandings. PR is a very powerful persuader in the right hands, but planning, strategy, key messaging, and positioning are all critical elements in the process. The best consultancies are those that will sit down with clients to review their business and specific requirements. Only frank and open discussion will allow an honest assessment of what PR can contribute and how best it might be handled.

1. Cohen, J. Report of new hepatitis virus has researchers intrigued and upset. *Science* **285**, 644–645 (1999).
2. Vogel, G. A scientific result without the science. *Science* **276**, 1327 (1997).