

Dealing with the media

Chris Gardner and Pam Pickering argue that whether you like it or not, good relations with the media are essential for getting your company's message across.

Paradoxically, although journalists are responsible for writing the news, as a profession they suffer from bad press. Mention the word journalist and there is a good chance that an image of an intrusive "hack," sensationalizing and distorting the facts just to get a front-page story, will spring to mind. Seeking out "bad" news, these individuals are your company's worst nightmare. Does your company really want to seek out journalists to convey its news?



Fortunately, the description above fits very few journalists, but many people have a basic mistrust of the profession as a whole, despite the obvious benefits of getting journalists to write about your company. The media—newspapers, journals, magazines

(paper and electronic), television, and radio—are the most powerful vehicle for communicating news about your company to the largest possible audience. For example, a newspaper like the *Financial Times* in the United Kingdom reaches around 300,000 readers, and this *Nature Biotechnology* supplement will potentially pass through the hands of 100,000 people across the biotechnology community.

News stories can have an extraordinary effect on attitudes, so it is critical that information reaching the press about your company be carefully managed: the beneficial effects of positive news must be maximized, while the potential damage of negative news is limited or countered constructively.

The big question is how to go about doing this: how do you go about creating a positive company profile with the media? A critical aspect of the process is good media relations—forming a healthy working relationship with key journalists. And this is best achieved by fully understanding what their job entails.

Understanding the media

Journalists need stories—this is fundamental and must be kept in mind when working with journalists of any medium. Journalists also work to punishing deadlines—especially those employed by daily papers. To make their job even tougher, journalists may receive around 50–100 press releases each day, be contacted repeatedly by telephone, email, and fax, and also have to leave the office to attend conferences or carry out interviews. From this plethora of information, the journalist has to select story lines and create the corresponding copy, perhaps in a matter of hours. In addition, story lines are not the journalist's decision alone—ideas may have to pass a selection process with either an editor or an editorial board before the journalist gets the go-ahead. So put yourself in the journalist's shoes, and see that he or she cannot afford to waste time and needs prompt, relevant information presented in a concise, easily digestible format.

Journalists are much more likely to return calls if they come from a credible source or from someone they have dealt with successfully in the past. However, establishing this sort of rapport involves an enormous amount of time and effort, especially when several target publications are involved. For many companies, employing an appropriate public relations agency that understands the biotechnology sector can be the only viable option. Experienced in dealing with journalists from all mediums, agency staff are in contact with the press every day. They know the journalists, their interests, and their expertise in the subject, which allows them to be in tune with the journalists' needs and to create appealing angles on stories. The agencies' scientific expertise and background knowledge of the biotechnology sector make them a key information source, and journalists regularly approach them for information. Specialist agencies can therefore be extremely useful in helping to bring your company to the attention of the press.

What the media need

Press releases are the accepted way of communicating a company's news to the media.

Chris Gardner and Pam Pickering are associate directors of the public relations company HCC De Facto Group, London, UK (infor@hccdefacto.com).



Although it can be followed up with a phone call, the press release should contain the details of the news clearly laid out in black and white. With so many press releases arriving on the journalist's desk every day, it is essential that *your* company release attract the journalist's attention. Make the headline clear, summarizing the key messages, and write a first paragraph that contains all the salient information. If appropriate, include quotes from key personnel, which can "lift" a story and can save the journalist having to make contact personally. At all costs, avoid an effusive or highly promotional writing style—keep to the facts.

Biotechnology, by its very nature, involves complex science and technology, and if these can be explained in a concise and easy-to-understand way, you will not only save the journalist a great deal of time but also improve your chances of getting coverage. Although company scientists may be enthralled by the subtleties of their innovations, the journalist will want to know what the "news" is—the story that the readers want to read and will understand. Background materials accompanying a release should be straightforward and unambiguous so as to avoid any possible misinterpretation. If technologies are misunderstood, they can be misrepresented.

Put a contact name on the press release in case further information is required, and ensure that the specified person actually does know about the subject and is available at the time the press release is sent out. Your company will look bad if the contact is away on holiday when a journalist calls. Moreover, should the journalist try to gather the information from less informed sources, messages could become distorted. In many cases, it is possible to anticipate the questions a journalist might ask, and it can be useful to prepare a question-and-answer sheet to accompany the press release.

What to say and when

Public and private companies have different communication objectives. A public company is bound by law to make public, in a timely fashion, any news (good and bad) that might influence the company's share price. When a company goes public, it is in the spotlight and needs to ensure that it has sufficient news through which to communicate the inherent value of its business plan so that potential investors will view the company as an attractive proposition. However, the company needs to have concrete news to deliver to the media, so plan for the year ahead, identifying possible scientific and business milestones.

Although a private company is not under the same obligations as a public company, it still hopes to raise its profile with potential partners and investors. Integrating media coverage with corporate objectives, such as the completion of a round of fund-raising, formation of a new partnership, or acquisition of a new technology, should be a subtle and well-orchestrated process. For example, a successful media-relations campaign for an initial public offering (IPO) should start months in advance and be continued post-IPO to manage the important "after-market" effects.

It is vitally important that you be realistic about the value of the stories that your company issues. Biotechnology companies have been accused of suffering "press-release diarrhea" and "blowing up every minor deal into a major strategic alliance"¹.

Dealing with the media should not be taken lightly, because working with journalists offers important opportunities for bringing your company to the attention of possible investors, partners, and shareholders.

Always ask yourself how your company's news sits within the overall biotechnology scene: if the same news came from, say, the company next door, would you expect to read about it in the *Financial Times*? Do not expect to get immediate coverage after every approach to the media. Generating interest, especially in national media outlets, can take time, and requires persistence and patience. Note, too, that although your aim may be to get coverage in the national media, you should not ignore local media and trade or other scientific press: these can do an enormous amount to raise your company profile within particular, and possibly better-targeted, audiences.

Occasionally, it may be appropriate to offer a story to a single newspaper as an exclusive under embargo, meaning that it will not be published until a specified date and time. If you offer a newspaper an exclusive, you must stick with this promise. Relationships can be damaged if competing papers publish the same information.

Strategy, corporate positioning, and core messages

Every contact with the press offers an opportunity to reinforce your corporate positioning. An important component of your communications strategy should be to define carefully your company's core messages—the business strategy, and its technologies

and where they fit into the overall biotechnology environment, and how the company will use the technologies to build the business. Once this positioning, or branding, has been agreed on, all employees of the company can be confident that they are communicating the same strong message. Communications will be consistent, continually reinforcing your company's identity and differentiating it from the competition.

Corporate positioning also forms the basis for the design of marketing materials such as the company's website, literature, and conference stands. Corporate positioning can be reflected in the style and the images used, as well as in strap-lines and body text. Ensure that the corporate positioning is reflected accurately, because marketing materials can leave a lasting impression. The help of an external agency can be useful: an agency with

biotechnology expertise will be able to use its experience to help create clear, sustainable messages that will distinguish your company in the biotechnology marketplace.

Identify the target audiences

To ensure that your message reaches the right people, you need to define the target audience for that news. By being clear about what you hope to achieve by releasing the news—to raise funds, to raise share value, or to raise the science and technology profile to attract partners—you will more easily define your audiences and appropriate targets.

For example, trade journals are an ideal venue for releasing both corporate and product news; scientific journals raise your company's profile within the scientific community and with potential partners; and consumer magazines may be useful for raising public awareness of new products or technologies. Local press, radio, and television are also powerful ways of getting local audiences interested in what you do. Use your key personnel as spokespersons for interviews, or as authors of articles, to raise company credibility.

When things get hot

It is worth bearing in mind that newspapers survive because of their sales, and not always because of the quality or importance of the information that they print. The stories that

hit the headlines generally contain some human interest, or a controversy or other scandal. Your company may one day become a target, perhaps because of a failed clinical trial, share price crash, or the ethical issues surrounding a technology. Being forewarned is being forearmed: if there *are* any “issues” within your business, tackle them head-on before a crisis occurs. The basic components of the strategy include identifying and training company spokespeople, clearly establishing the company’s position on the particular issue internally, and preparing policies and statements. Your crisis-management strategy should be rehearsed, and the list of spokespeople continually amended to take into account changes of staff, illness, and holidays. Managing the situation will put your company in control and will ensure that you are always prepared to address any questions from the media.

However, should the media get hold of a story, offer up as much information as possible. If you are obstructive or try to cover up the story, the journalist will be convinced that there really *is* something worthwhile to pursue. If you do not know the

answer to a question, say you will find out the answer and get back to them. If you state a time by which you will do this, stick to it. If you, or your agency spokespeople, are helpful and straightforward and have built a good relationship with the journalist, you are more likely to get fair coverage in the press. However, remember that there is no such thing as “off the record.” Even if a journalist does not print a piece of information, it will be in the journalist’s mind, and may influence his or her attitude about the current situation and any future news from the company.

Media training

Media training can be invaluable for company spokespeople. Besides providing an overview of how the media works, such training involves offering help on how to handle awkward questions—how to answer the question, move the conversation over to what you want to discuss, and then communicate your company message. Media training involves simulating interview conditions to prepare participants for “real-life” interviews. A good

public relations agency will be able to advise on media training.

Conclusions

Dealing with the media should not be taken lightly because working with journalists offers important opportunities for bringing your company to the attention of possible investors, partners, and shareholders. You can use the media to create an understanding of your company among your chosen target audiences, and to assist in the execution of your business strategy and hence the development of your company. Dealing with the media can be challenging, however, and many companies benefit from the specialist expertise of a public relations agency. Working with an agency with expert knowledge of the biotechnology sector can be invaluable in generating media interest, and such agencies can offer support and guidance in the development of your business strategy and communications plan.

1. Cookson, C. Pitching pharma, biotechnology and the media. *HMS Beagle*, 9 November (<http://news.bm.com/hmsbeagle/current/viewpts/pressbox>, 2001).