

## OPINION/

# WAS IT THE CONFERENCE OR THE CLIMATE?

Arriving at the Annual Alex. Brown Health Care Seminar this past May, I carried little baggage—physical or otherwise. With the lineup for our June issue already set, there was none of the angst that often accompanies journalists hunting for a story—no space was reserved for meeting coverage, to be filled regardless of newsworthiness. Nor did I expect any announcements beyond the usual press releases on new corporate agreements or financings, often timed for distribution at such financial confabs. And over the past few months I had heard presentations by most of the featured companies—either in our editorial offices or at similar events.

So riding the Metroliner to Baltimore (sitting on the right side of the train to best admire the brilliant Chesapeake sunset shimmering off the bay), I decided to strike the novelist's pose and train my eye on the interactions between the attendees, presenters, and the Alex. Brown people buzzing around clients and potential clients.

That the conference ultimately sounded a dull, sour note surprised me. To begin with, in the 25 or so sessions I witnessed, the host analysts neither asked a single probing question nor offered any insight into the companies during the introductions. One attendee, with experience both in academia and at a major pharmaceutical company, chatted with me at length about these matters in the corridor outside the seminar rooms. Fairly, he said that the purpose of this conference was "to showcase the companies, not rip them apart." And, he observed, the audience was filled with lots of inexperienced people "soaking up everything that was said."

Yet the lack of sophistication was alarming. There was the fund manager who had "taken a flyer" on a lone biotech investment, confessing to having no knowledge of such businesses, but wanting to cash in on the potential. He had blithely committed his investors' funds—earmarked primarily for retirement—to a company whose strategy was to license off-the-shelf chemicals abandoned by major pharmaceutical firms. Finding an unexplored use for one of them would fund more internal research, the company claimed. A cash-conscious, conservative approach, but not a flagship for one's portfolio, nor one that fairly represents the upper limit of biotechnology's hopes.

This manager showed little appreciation for, or interest in, the significant advances being made. Admittedly knowing little about a well-known Emeryville, CA company, he nonetheless walked out of its presentation, dismissing the value of PCR as too exotic to comprehend. That manager was not an exception: one of the few familiar faces I found in the audience, a local resident who had attended the conference faithfully for years, commented that there was "a sea change" in the attendees and in the hosts' attitude.

The real dismay, however, came at hearing so many CEOs and CFOs talk in oversimplifications, obfuscating facts and technical feasibilities. They spoke of breakthroughs and competition between companies and technologies in ways that would never make the first draft of a prospectus: Revenues looming right around the corner and unproven technologies that would dance quickly through the Food and Drug Administration as none have done before.

Such talk makes any real numbers numbing. My corridor friend recognized this, too: "You can sit there and listen to their presentations, then talk to them as scientists, and you hear something different," he noted. Further, he said, "it's the industry, not the conference," that explains these goings on.

What is going on? Is the need for an influx of public capital so strong these days? Haven't we learned over the past few years that inflaming public expectations is counterproductive? Or even worse, were the analysts right not to stir things up in the sessions, knowing that hard questions would only muddy these waters?

—Mark Ratner

**Translation**

Turn to translation specialists when you need to communicate with the global biotech community. The Corporate Word translates:

- Biotechnology R & D
- Process documentation
- Patents and regulations
- Marketing and sales materials
- Audiovisual presentations — technical and promotional

Our complete foreign-language services include:

- Machine-assisted translation
- Phototypesetting and desktop publishing
- Complete art and printing
- Slide production, voiceovers
- Interpreting
- Cross-cultural consulting

**the corporate word, inc.**

18 South, Gateway Center 3  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
Telephone: (412) 391-0378  
Outside PA: 800-445-9919

翻訳

Write in No. 48 on Reader Service Card

## BIO/TECHNOLOGY

is the only journal to give you the news every month.

- o Features
- o Original Research
- o Product Reviews
- o Industrial Applications
- o Job Openings
- o and more

Enter your subscription today.

In the U.S. call toll-free:  
1-800/524-0328.