Pressing matters in biotech

No magic bullets or one-size-fits-all strategies when it comes to attracting media

By Brad Hussey, NARUS Communications

'The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion it has taken place.'
– George Bernard Shaw

Shaw couldn't have imagined much of what has taken place in the global biotech sector over the last 20 years (or in almost any other modern industry), but his words nonetheless ring true for anyone taxed with communicating effectively in a complex, crowded and ever-changing space.

So much of what companies do to communicate – and it doesn't matter if the context is sales, marketing, public relations, internal communications to employees and shareholders or media relations – is undertaken rather robotically. The motions are cycled through like clockwork – newsletters, press releases, Web site updates, Tweets, and so on, often in the absence of a larger plan and a true understanding of what our diverse audiences want and need to receive. The medium is not necessarily the message.

Hence, the illusion that we have communicated is all too easy to achieve when the tools of communication themselves become more important than our actual communication goals. Put another way, the carpenter doesn't wake up in the morning and wonder 'what should I use my hammer for today?' – rather, he uses it to drive a nail when a nail needs driving.

For the biotech sector, the stakes have never been higher when it comes to branding, marketing and PR. Increasing competition, greater complexity in technologies and their application, scarcity of investment capital, a public bombarded with information and other factors make for a noisy environment in which to get your messages across. Nowhere is this notion more evident than with all-too-common approaches to dealing with the media, and in particular the curious art of the press release. With e-mail and other electronic communications anyone can easily blast a press release to practically every media outlet, and if you check the popular wire services, you will see that almost everyone does. Often. But how well does the practice serve them?

A former editor from a national newspaper, speaking to a group of communicators from the science and technology research community at a recent conference in Winnipeg, laughed aloud as he recounted some of the press releases that cluttered his inbox. Very few, he said, got a second glance past the headline, fewer were read in their entirety, and fewer still sparked a story in his publication. Why? Primarily, because they didn't contain news, or if they did, the key facts were buried under a mountain of self-serving rhetoric. In short, they didn't tell a story that was worth telling.

Unfortunately, he's no different from any other journalist or editor. They are all working in an environment with increased pressures, reduced resources and increasing competition from new and traditional media. And they simply don't have the time to read every one of the hundreds of press releases that they receive each day.

So, how do you catch an editor's attention when you only have a few second and a few words to do so? Start by remembering the '10-second rule' (liberally, about the amount of time someone will peruse your release): create a clear and captivating (just clear will do) headline and lead that explains the issue at hand and invites them to read on. Then, follow a few simple rules to maximize your chances of getting the coverage you want:

- Remember that the word 'new' is found in 'news'; make sure your release includes new information that will be of interest to the media outlet and their particular news consumer. Tell a story, as simply as you can.

- Look at your press release from a reporter's point of view; release information that you know will be of interest to reporters covering specific beats (ie. science, health, business etc.).

- Make sure that your tone suits the medium; a one-size-fits-all release may work for one media outlet but can be totally ignored by another. Your release should be tailored for national, community or industry press using appropriate

terms modelled on the language that they use in their reporting.

- Stick to the facts; avoid rhetoric, such as constantly referring to your organization as a 'leader' or an 'innovator' in your field. Don't take up too much space in the press release describing your organization. Include a standard organization backgrounder with the release.

- Don't crowd your press release with data and minutia – provide a separate fact sheet to summarize background about the issues/science in your release.

- Provide contact information for a real person who can speak to the story. Legitimate media will not simply print what's in your release. Time your release according to your thought leaders' availability.

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There is no sure-fired formula for getting meaningful media coverage for your organization, and all coverage is relative to other events occurring across the news spectrum. We've simplified things here for the sake of space, but suffice it to say that by sticking to the rudiments and making a commitment to plain dealing in the information you send out, you can greatly increase your chances for garnering headlines.

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