

Good Science Gone Bad? Avoiding Media Pitfalls

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Why should journals seek mass-media attention? Barbara Gastel opened with this question to Richard Lane, the first speaker in this intriguing session about science for public consumption.

The scientific community seeks mass-media attention for philosophic reasons, according to Lane. It does it because it cares, because it wants the public to engage in science. Quoting Shirley M Malcom, head of education and human resources at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the keynote speaker at the CSE conference, who talked about access to wider audiences, Lane said that the scientific community feels a responsibility to provide medical information to a wider audience by using translators, and the translators are the mass media. We do it, Lane said, to help communicate and promote the work of science to those wider audiences. We

need to collectively take responsibility to communicate effectively so that journalists and the public will understand the message we are delivering. Other, not so altruistic reasons to seek mass-media coverage are to create brand awareness and to promote development. By reaching out to a wider public, we are enhancing our journal's profile. Why should we care about our profile? The influence of the consumer is increasing. Patients read about medical information in the mass media and talk to their doctors about treatment. The volume of traffic to *The Lancet* Web site peaks dramatically when a newsworthy article is publicized effectively; visits to the site then outnumber paid subscriptions by 20 to 1.

Ginger Pinholster responded to Gastel's question by saying that the mission of AAAS, the publisher of *Science*, is to "advance science and innovation throughout the world, for the benefit of all people". The most effective way to communicate information is through a press release. However, press releases can be misinterpreted. For example, *Science* published an article about a genetically altered monkey. The press release showed a healthy, normal monkey with the caption that the first genetically treated monkey may promise medical advances for humans, and it mentioned the *GFP* marker gene, which did not express green fluorescent protein. A major US newspaper ran the headline "Monkey glows green for human benefit". Pinholster provided samples of effective and ineffective press releases—one of the flawed efforts was about the monkey—and discussed how the poor press releases could be made better.

When preparing a press release, said Pinholster, first, know the communication

objectives: Who are the targets? What is the story? Decide about timing: Should the release be issued under embargo? How much information should be included in the press release? When should a news conference be called? Her "golden rules" for press releases are these: (1) Just say it. (2) Never hype (and avoid false hopes). (3) Enforce embargoes to provide efficient, equitable dissemination of information and to give reporters time to do research; lift the embargo quickly if it clearly has been broken; then quell it. (4) Paint a picture by using snappy headers and simple graphics.

Press releases, said Lane, should have news value, be concise (300-350 words), and be catalysts that lead to reading of a full article; and authors should be collaborators and should be available when the release is sent out. Lane said that the news conference can be an effective means of communicating scientific information because it allows audience input. When *The Lancet* published a series of five articles about worldwide child mortality, the series was publicized through a press conference. In publicizing the rice-genome papers, *Science* used video conferencing that linked the United States and international reporters and held a private press breakfast. Teleconferencing, "walkabouts", and full press briefings are also used to publicize important studies.

Both Lane and Pinholster recommended the use of the wire services—such as the Associated Press, Reuters, and UPI—when targeting press releases. Google News Alerts, manual tracking, clip services, and Nexis are useful for measuring the success of a media blitz. 📡