Building bridges between science and the public

Scientific research is not only communicated by research institutions themselves, but also through specialist agencies. One such agency is Genius GmbH in Darmstadt. The agency describes itself as a professional in the field of communication of science to the public using the latest communication tools. We spoke to Kristina Sinemus, CEO, partner and founder of the agency. Sinemus holds a PhD in biology.

Your job is to communicate information on scientific topics including green genetic engineering. What kind of information do you communicate to the public and who is your target audience?

We specialise in addressing opinion leaders rather than the consumer. This mainly involves opinion leaders in politics, specialised media as well as expert scientists. Our communication is aimed at audiences ranging from the young scientist to the curious layperson, who is not really consumer as such.

So you do not simply “break down” the information, but you also adhere to a certain standard in communicating this information...

Yes, this is a basic understanding of our work: we design our communications to suit specific target groups. But we do not want to simplify to the point where we run the risk of transmitting something that is scientifically incorrect. There is a danger of this happening at a certain point when you begin to advertise something. We do not see ourselves as an agency that communicates science as a brand to the average consumer, but rather as “breaking down” complex topics in a way that makes them understandable for opinion leaders.

Your agency largely depends on the communication of information on green genetic engineering. However, do you not find that information on this topic falls on relatively deaf ears?
In my view, this is not the case. We are not just producing standard product advertisements. It is much more a matter of clarifying that, in a post-industrial environment, we must carry on learning to cope with progress and progressive technologies. If this were not the case and we wanted to live in a society with no technological progress, we would have to completely redefine the society we live in. Among the technologies that contribute to progress are biotechnology, green genetic engineering and nanotechnology. They are all complex technologies that will continue to play an important part in all aspects of modern living. One such aspect includes consumer boycotts of products made with genetically modified corn, for example. Our goal is not to sell this product to
consumers. Our aim is show that we live in a complex scientific world in which consumers should seek a greater depth of understanding and be able to integrate this into their day-to-day lives to a greater extent as well as seeing a positive opportunity in such developments, maybe in terms of job creation, if nothing else.

In your editorial “Talking with the Public – Challenging the Public Scare” (Biotechnology Journal 2007, 2) you deplore the fact that scientific evidence plays a minor role in the emotive debate surrounding GM plants. What are you, as communication professionals, doing to prevent this?

We try to provide information that is as up-to-date and as contextual as possible – in different media, on websites, in recently published booklets, but we also work to boost knowledge in other contexts. One such example is the sponsoring of scientifically based school activities. For instance, we co-founded a research laboratory in the region that aims to make science come alive for primary schoolchildren. We attempt wherever we can to transmit scientific information in the context of society as a whole, as individuals and as company.

One of your requirements is that the exchange between scientific research and the public uses a number of different but equally effective methods. What do you mean by this?

In the long term, information should not just be communicated through one-to-one conversations, but modern approaches such as moderation procedures should be taken on board. The overall aim is to have a wider regional audience for the information we want to communicate. I am thinking of ‘future workshops’, public forums or ‘open-space’ meetings.

Let’s talk about mediators, your term for journalists: What role do they play in the debate on green genetic engineering?

In my view, they play a decisive role. Yet it is necessary to differentiate between different media. On the one hand we have specialist journalists who transmit specialised topics to a professional audience. On the other hand, there are general journalists. Standards and expectations for each group are quite different. Problems arise when a general journalist is faced with the task of transmitting very specific, highly complex scientific activity quickly to a consumer audience. There is a huge risk that the issue will not be represented in the best way in the headlines.

Experienced journalists will not be particularly happy with this analysis of their work. They will gather the conflicting views of different experts, and present scientific issues as part of society as a whole, and at best identify the experts’ positions in a particular issue.

For me, this is a very simplistic definition. The situation is a lot more complex, and we need to take this into consideration.

What do you mean?

Journalists should play a more active role, go beyond simply listing interests and reproducing statements, they should try to interest the readers in the issues in their professional field.

Sociologists of science have found that a greater understanding of scientific issues does not increase their acceptance. How do you, as communications experts, react to this?
Yes or no is not the question for Genius.

We do not consider it our main purpose to generate public acceptance for any sort of technology. In my view, the understanding of these complex interrelations in the context of society and economics is decisive. I do not wish to force any consumer to accept genetically modified foods, but I would like to develop more understanding of technology that I consider innovative and which will be with us in the long term.

Let’s talk about your research clients. What can/must you do for them?

We ourselves can act as a sort of mediator. I do believe that we see “both sides” (science and society, editor’s note) relatively well and can build bridges. We try to build bridges so that A can come into contact with B and try to understand each other.

You have been in business for ten years. Has the critically informed relationship between the public and science changed? And if so, how?

I am not sure that “change” is the right word. It has been a gradual development process over the years and it will remain so. I am convinced that society and politics will increasingly understand that technology has become an integral aspect of our lives and that we have to deal with it.

Have you figured out why red biotechnology is generally accepted, but green biotechnology is not?

I believe the connection is relatively simple. The cost-benefit effect is pretty obvious for red biotechnology. One example is insulin. Patients who use genetically modified insulin have a health benefit. We simply do not have a comparable example in the field of green genetic engineering. Thus far we basically have no advantage that is directly visible to the consumer.
You write: “The question is not whether societies want new technologies – there is a clear economic need for them.” Does the German public share this opinion? Keyword: risk communication and technology assessment. It began with the critical discussion on the use of nuclear energy and continued with green genetic engineering...

I find the comparison with nuclear energy as not particularly useful. Nonetheless it is a good question as to whether society goes along with technological advancement. I do not believe it is a decision for one single individual, but it is about society as a whole moving in the same direction. Plato and Aristotle regarded science and society as a whole. We have distanced ourselves from this holistic view. I believe that we should attempt to bring these two distinct elements together again.

If we cannot link new technologies to reasonable and necessary risk management as well as to risk communication and technology assessment, we have failed in our approach.

The interview was carried out by Walter Pytlik, BioRegion Ulm, 15th July 2008.

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