

Parallel Session 26: Interactions between science communication and science policies

**SCIENTISTS AND POLITICIANS: THE NEED TO COMMUNICATE
AN UPDATE SINCE PCST GENEVA 2001**

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Abstract

At PCST Geneva 2001 I described a successful program of communication with members of parliament then being run by CSIRO National Awareness. Since then, as an independent communication specialist, I have refined the techniques used in the original program and have been running programs on behalf of two other organisations. This paper outlines the work and results over the last two years.

Key words: Politicians communication techniques

Text

Development of techniques

In the last two years I have been using the communication techniques developed by CSIRO National Awareness in programs for two other organisations – the Co-operative Research Centres and the Grains Research and Development Corporation.

I have established specific databases for the research areas covered by each organisation in which the industries and interests of politicians' electorates are matched up with research being done. For example, I have defined all politicians with electorates where wheat is grown and target wheat research stories to them.

The stories come from media releases prepared by science journalists working for the two organisations. The most effective delivery mechanism for busy politicians seems to be very short (3-4 paragraph) emails with informative headlines and phone, email and web contact details for those seeking the full details.

Here's a very recent example from a Co-operative Research Centre:

PLASTICS PROMISE A SWEETER FUTURE FOR SUGAR

Scientists predict there will be a brighter future for Australia's hard-hit sugar industry as it becomes a producer of bio-plastics.

Bio-plastics are just one of a number of diversification opportunities for the sugar industry, according to researchers from of the Cooperative Research Centre for Sugar Industry Innovation through Biotechnology (CRC SIIB).

"Every household will be using bio-degradable plastic bags, bottles and containers, every car will have bio-degradable plastic dashboards and fittings, fine clothing will be crafted from these

biopolymers to replace petrochemical plastic and nylon with bio-nylons and bio-fabrics all made from renewable resources," says the CRC's Dr Steve Brumbley.

Dr Brumbley says that research being carried out by the CRC is building on an already proven process for making plastics from sucrose, needing only a minor shift in economics for the process to become a market leader. In this lies Australia's opportunity, he says.

Full version of story from parsnips@cyberone.com.au

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This story was strategically placed within a national issue already under much public and political debate – the threatened future of Australia's sugar industry. Politicians whose electorates are affected by the state of the sugar industry are very keen to have presentations from this scientist, and within the next month or so, he will make a presentation to a Government Industry Policy Committee. As well, there has been considerable media coverage – one politician brought a journalist to the briefing. This is an ideal situation because it not only produces media coverage, it also has the scientist and the politician communicating in front of journalists.

There are several other examples of this kind of outcome, that is, immediate response from politicians in particular electorate, invitations to give personal briefings, and media coverage. This tells me we are hitting targets.

With about one story per week coming out from each of the organisations mentioned above, I am aiming for as many as possible to become the subject of follow-up briefings and to be used by politicians in their committee and legislative debates as well as for extended media coverage.

Evaluation

This is done mainly by email survey with ongoing phone checks. An example of an email survey is:

Dear (polician's name)

Over the last few months I have been sending to you via email stories about work of Australia's Cooperative Research Centres. The latest item, DETECTING SECURITIES FRAUD was sent to you on 6 February. Other stories ranged from better avocados and beef tenderness tests to help for ageing power stations and pollution checks for the aquaculture industry.

I'd like to find out :

1. Do you wish to be kept on the email list?

Has the material been useful? In what way?

2. Is it in a friendly format for you? Should we make changes?

How?

3. Would you appreciate personal briefings on work relevant to your electorate or State? Any subject in particular?

Currently I do not have the resources to do a detailed survey of politicians' attitudes to research, of the kind that was reported at Geneva for CSIRO. But it is clear from wide media coverage and comment from politicians that the way Australian research is being funded is a controversial issue in 2004, election year.

Just a few days ago (13 May) the upper house of the parliament debated for two hours the mechanisms for deciding which Cooperative Research Centres would continue to receive funding. There is particular debate about those doing "public good" research and whether government policies on such things as fossil fuels versus alternative energies are affecting the search for sustainable energy. Such a debate is very unusual and it was interesting to hear a number of the senators using some of the very words used in CRC media releases.

I would be happy to provide further details of my programs to PCST colleagues.

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