

Embracing Biotechnology

BIO's Public Education Campaign by Jeff Joseph

If you have ever gotten frustrated trying to explain what you do at work to friends and family, we can relate. One of the greatest challenges perennially facing the biotech industry is the lack of public understanding of what biotechnology is and the many ways it contributes to a better world. A lack of solid public acceptance and support can make it all the more difficult to advance our advocacy efforts in the United States Congress and in state legislatures across the country.

The bright glare of science fiction films and TV shows skewed by fantasy often overshadows the reality of biotechnology's contributions. Unfortunately, the average American cannot even define *biotechnology*, let alone appreciate the significant hope it creates for humanity. Educating the public about the existing benefits and future possibilities of biotechnology is imperative to dispel the fears and misinformation associated with it. National polling has consistently found that providing information on biotechnology results in a more than 40% increase in favorability.

To combat misperceptions and myths that resonate with the public, the Biotechnology Industry Organization has made public education a key priority. In 2008, we launched an educational campaign to put a human face on biotechnology.

MEDIA PRESENCE

As a first step, we are building and developing relationships with national and local media to highlight the achievements and potential of biotechnology. We have hosted biotech boot camps (crash courses for reporters) in targeted cities. We also organize satellite media tours with radio and television reporters across the country covering timely issues that feature biotech experts and beneficiaries. In April 2009, we hosted a satellite media tour around Earth Day to showcase how biotechnology is increasing environmental sustainability. Interviews aired on 379 radio stations and 114 independent television stations and reached a combined audience of more than 100 million people.

An important component of our effort is identifying and activating biotech company employees, allies, and beneficiaries. The stories of biotechnology's supporters help us personalize biotechnology for mainstream America and show the diverse ways the industry benefits us daily. In addition to hosting Meet-Ups in cities with active biotech communities — such as Boston — we work with these partners to share success stories, comment on recent news reports, and build a grassroots network.

WEB PORTALS

We have created several websites as portals to access information about biotechnology, read about innovations, connect with experts in the field, and ask questions.

IAmBiotech.org is geared toward members of the biotech community, including both researchers and patients. This site showcases the passion of patients, farmers, researchers, and other innovators who are finding solutions to real problems through biotechnology. It allows them to connect, communicate, and share their passion. You can even become a fan of IAmBiotech on Facebook.

WhatCanBiotechDoForYou.com is designed to foster a conversation with the public about biotechnology and highlight its contributions to society. Every month, the website asks visitors to vote for a school with an exemplary program in science or biotechnology. The winning school receives a \$250 grant. You can nominate your local school on the site.

EleventhHourFacts.com examines the science behind popular television shows and movies, taking advantage of public interest in such media to help people understand the facts behind the fiction. Set up as a response to the "Eleventh Hour" series (which has since been canceled by CBS), this site has provided live blogging about episodes of FOX's "Fringe" series as well as giving background and solicited reviews of the movie *District 9*.

Since our campaign began, we have made great strides toward educating the American public. To date, we have educated nearly 100 reporters in biotech boot camps, generated more than 740 million impressions through the media, hosted more than 300 viewers per day on IAmBiotech.org, and partnered with more than 40 patient advocacy organizations.

Of course, there is always more that can be done — and that's where you come in. As our colleagues in the scientific community, we hope you'll join in this education effort. Register on IAmBiotech.org and share your thoughts about the many ways biotechnology benefits society every day. We want more people to understand the science behind what you do — and the potential of biotechnology to dramatically improve our quality of life.

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