



Are Biotechnology Meetings and Symposia Doing the Job?

The need for speed in scientific discovery may be a hindrance to authentic knowledge exchange.

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Sir Isaac Newton said, back in 1676, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants." Newton's modest self-assessment of his scientific competence holds relevance in today's debate on the value of scientific meetings, and our quest for faster scientific discovery.

The first scientific meetings involving a rigorous approach to knowledge exchange started with the formation of "learned societies," where like-minded people gathered to interact with their peers. The oldest society, Accademia dei Lincei, was founded in Rome in 1603—a group of aristocratic botanist friends determined to understand all natural sciences. Next, scientific publications and print journals emerged.

It took centuries to go from hand-written, illuminated manuscripts to movable type in published journals, but just a few years [decades?] to move from print to cyberspace [okay?] and to rely on scientific meetings for knowledge-sharing. But, are these changes benefiting science?

Unfortunately, the biotechnology industry does not have the equivalent of a learned society. Biotechnology, by definition, involves the commercialization of science and does not have the basic science focus that permits rigorous self-analysis of emerging scientific discoveries.

The industry's need for speed in scientific discovery may be incompatible with the old peer-reviewed approach, but eliminating the review process at scientific meetings may affect content and quality. Because the evaluation [of a new finding?] does not generally occur at scientific meetings, its impact on scientific discovery may not be apparent to the audience.

At biopharmaceutical scientific conferences today, topic selection is often dictated by profit motives; hot topics get the most play. However, the topic *du jour* approach may not advance sci-

ence. For example, the proliferation of meetings on biosimilars and disposables, while satisfying our intellectual curiosity, perhaps has eclipsed more pressing issues that would advance drug development.

People generally attend meetings to acquire knowledge that can be directly applied to a problem. Could meeting organizers do a better job of reviewing presentations to ensure quality and scientific rigor, and to reduce redundancy? Could an independent body be assembled to provide timely review—attaching a "Good-Housekeeping-like" stamp of approval on certain meetings? Perhaps meetings need more audience interaction, where attendees actively participate in a freer flow of ideas. The current "sage-on-stage" method inhibits the sharing of audience experienced. Alternatively, the development of smaller, more scientifically focused symposia, though less profitable, could permit more scientific knowledge exchange.

To summarize, there are plenty of meetings, conferences, and symposia that provide scientific venues and allow scientific interaction among participants at intimate levels. But, in our quest for speed, we have lost some of our ability to gauge the quality and applicability of the science. There may be a need for scientific conferences that provide focused, reviewed content and the free exchange of ideas.

I don't expect to see peer-reviewed meeting presentations in this industry, because scientific advancements in the biopharmaceutical industry tend to be speed dependent, and reviews sometimes lose out. On the other hand, perhaps the equivalent of a learned society in biopharmaceuticals would contribute to the science because of the authority conferred, based on its special knowledge. This would result in more effective dissemination of information regionally, nationally, and internationally. ♦