

The battle of biotech arrives on US shores

Bruised and battered in Europe, the biotech industry is desperate to fare better in the US.

The major players are in a race with public interest groups that pits education against activism. Craig McGuire reports

Pledging not to repeat past mistakes, the biotechnology industry has amassed its forces for an extensive PR campaign in the US. Bolstered by bipartisan political support, its first step is to educate an uninformed US consumer base, which means doing battle with a loosely knit but formidable network of PR-savvy public interest factions that just won't go away.

While the debate over genetically engineered (GE) food sat on the back burner in the US for well over a decade, the leading biotech companies launched a series of poorly timed and ineffectual PR campaigns in the European markets several years ago. "Basically, Monsanto, and to a lesser extent the other GE companies in the European Union, tried traditional PR tactics in 1996-99 that failed," says Ronnie Cummins, director of the Organic Consumers Association.

Not only did the fragmented EU campaigns come on the heels of the European "Mad Cow" crisis, which made consumers extremely sensitive, biotechnology soon proved an easy mark for both European journalists and politicians. "The PR efforts over in Europe were a total fiasco," says Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy communications coordinator Ben Lilliston. "They approached Europe very aggressively and were met head-on by a lot of heavy resistance."

While he argues that the EU campaign was not a total failure for the biotech industry, Stephen Kehoe, senior managing director at BSMG Worldwide, concedes there are valuable lessons to be learned. Guns blazing, the Council for Biotechnology Information earlier this year handed BSMG the reins on a \$50 million integrated communications program. "One thing everyone agrees upon in the biotechnology industry in the US is that supporters have to stick together," he says.



Battlefield.... groups like Greenpeace are using guerrilla tactics

Tale of the tape

Pro-GE

Key players: The Council for Biotechnology Information (members: Aventis, BASF, Dow, DuPont, Monsanto, Novartis, Astra Zeneca, Biotechnology Industry Organization)

Budget: \$50 million this year, could grow substantially over next five years

Notable supporters: President Bill Clinton; Vice President Al Gore; Gov. George W. Bush; Andrew Young, former mayor of Atlanta and UN ambassador; James Watson, Nobel prize winner

Tactics: Extensive information distribution, TV and radio advertising, Web site, newsletters

Anti-GE

Key players: Approximately 50 NGO/public interest organizations, including Organic Consumers Associations, the Center for Food Safety, Friends of the Earth, the Consumers Union and Greenpeace.

Budget: About \$1 million

Notable supporters: Prince Charles; British Medical Association; Dr. Michael Hansen (Consumers Union); Dr. Margaret Mellon (Union of Concerned Scientists); Sen. Patrick Moynihan; Sen. Barbara Boxer

Tactics: Grass-roots lobbying, shareholder actions, leafleting campaigns, Web sites, boycotting, non-violent protests

gether to form the Council, which launched its campaign recently via extensive information outreach, TV and radio ads, a recently unveiled Web site and an upcoming newsletter.

But the Council's pockets might not be as deep as some think. While expenditures will probably climb higher over the next five years, Kehoe says the five-year, \$250 million figure being bandied about is based on speculation, as Council members have yet to allocate additional funds.

Facing off against the Council are some 50 US-based public interest organizations, includ-

ingredients from their products. Because the FDA, or any other US regulatory agency for that matter, has not issued any safety warnings about GE foods, these actions appear to be gambits aimed at heading off potential consumer backlash. The biotech agenda, however, has not been without its victories, as some anti-GE folks grudgingly concede.

John Stauber, editor of *PR Watch*, says that biotech PR pros used to just bury the issue. "That's changed as consumer rejection abroad and looming trade wars have shed media attention on biotechnology," he says. "People in the US are shocked to find that, without their knowledge or permission, their food has become genetically engineered." Aware of this, biotech PR pros have now placed information distribution at the heart of all PR efforts.

"Our whole strategy is based on getting people to understand this technology and what it can deliver," Kehoe explains. "The opponents' main 'fear of the unknown' argument is really all they have in their arsenal. We need to get the message out that there hasn't been a single documented report that these things aren't safe to eat."

Political support

Meanwhile on Capitol Hill, US politicians from both parties have embraced the biotech industry, lending credence to the Council and making GE opponents very nervous. Most recently, a group of eight state governors, led by Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack, launched an initiative supporting biotechnology. "The biotech critics are gaining momentum, but they have a huge task ahead, because Bush, followed by Clinton and Gore, have let the biotech horse out of the barn, and it's running amuck," says Stauber. "It matters little who wins the presidential election because both parties are solidly pro-biotech and unlikely to initiate meaningful safety testing or labeling."

There are a number of upcoming events that should turn up the volume on the debate. Court cases, like the one from the Washington, DC-based Center for Food Safety attacking the FDA's policies, are usually good fodder for media

"We need to get