

Controlling Technology Hype

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Buckeyballs, Nanotubes, fuel cells, micromachines, quantum and biological computing, human cloning, are all buzzwords for technologies emerging from laboratories or still resident within. There has been much publicity about them all. Some is unwarranted “gee-whiz” visions of how much better life will be when this or that technology is fully deployed. The problem is that for as many technologies that make lives better, there are just as many that fall into obscurity. No one can predict the future with accuracy. If one could, the many failed dot-com companies would not have been started.

PR practitioners bear part of the onus for creating over-zealous hype about emerging technologies. They accept technologists’ views at face value rather than investigating them. This is unfortunate because PR practitioners should prevent hype and present new technologies accurately and persuasively. Hype damages the credibility of the technology, the technology developer and the PR practitioner. Technologies that will be ready “real soon now” or in “five or 10 years” are suspect, because they rarely appear in the time forecasted. Moreover, their commercial viability unproven, as the Internet bubble taught everyone. Thus, PR practitioners should be as much publicity blockers as publicity facilitators. They should insist on accuracy in order to sustain long-term relationships with journalists and the public at large.

One challenge PR practitioners face in maintaining accuracy are developers themselves -- inventors, scientists and engineers. These individuals are passionate about their discoveries. Some believe they are going to change the world, and on rare occasion, one does. Some are messianic, over-bearing and heedless of marketplace realities. Others are out to make millions and if hype will help them, that is fine.

The most prolific inventor in U.S. history, Thomas A. Edison, was a dismal businessman. His inventions changed the world, but their success often came after modifications that Edison refused to make. Edison developed electrical power generation and distribution, but he believed direct current was the future. He hated alternating current, but alternating current drives world economies today. Edison invented the phonograph but he thought all recordings would be on cylinders like a can open at both ends. He fought against flat disks we know as records and by time he realized he had lost the format war, it was too late to save his phonograph company. Edison invented the motion picture projector but he thought the future of movies was a box, called a kintoscope, over which one bent to view a short movie of a minute or less. Edison, a hard-working technologist and brilliant publicist, could not separate belief from marketplace acceptance.

A second and more insidious technology hype that PR practitioners must combat is

fraud or misrepresentation. (A scientist misunderstands the technology/science.) These are miracle cures that fail to prove out, engineers with empty black boxes and programmers with nice demos and no code beneath. Think of Cold Fusion, the Laser Arms self-chilling beer can and Paradyne Corp.'s empty cabinet with blinking lights that Paradyne claimed was a telephone encryption device. A PR practitioner who aids this hype can be as liable as the individual who engages in it. And, consequences can be severe. Martin Fleischmann and Stanley Pons, both at the University of Utah when they announced Cold Fusion, left the country after waves of criticism overwhelmed them. Executives of Laser Arms went to jail. Paradyne paid a huge fine for misrepresentation and lost its reputation for years. This is why PR practitioners need to be cautious even when knowledgeable companies and individuals have signed onto a technologist's view.

The PR practitioner's role is to hew to accuracy rather than flog enthusiasm. It is a willingness to stand up to technologists, to assemble facts and to present stories within the context of the marketplace. It is understatement to write that this is a hard task fraught with professional peril. To technologists, PR practitioners often are paid megaphones. They are not to question a technologist's statements or ideas. Regrettably, there are practitioners who agree with this view. They believe their sole job is to get a story out. Others verify facts. This, of course, defaults on the practitioner's responsibility for crafting effective messages, and it threatens the practitioner's reputation.

Accuracy requires statesmanship. The PR practitioner must juggle a technologist's ego while adapting the technologist's vision to the marketplace. Sometimes, there is no hope of achieving this, which is why PR practitioners working in new technologies must be willing to walk from unreasonable individuals. Particularly frightening are messianic technologists who sweep all before them – engineers, investors and potential customers – and are dismissive of anyone daring to ask an inappropriate question. These individuals are close to cultists and their force of personality is remarkable. It is best to stay distanced from them because they warp the world to fit their vision.

With more reasonable technologists, the PR practitioner must still build credibility and trust that will allow the practitioner to modify the technologist's views without a struggle. This, however, depends on how much one is willing to get one's hands dirty. The PR practitioner should talk the technologist's language, understand the technology and know how to translate complex ideas to journalists and laypersons. This means getting into the guts of a technology and learning how it works. Regrettably, PR practitioners often are unwilling to learn. This may be because practitioners see themselves as creatives rather than scientists, but that is no excuse. Practitioners who do not have the skills to evaluate a technology should have access to scientists, engineers and others who do. Some communications organizations have understood this dilemma and have cross-trained scientists and engineers as communicators. (It is probably easier to do this than to cross-train PR

practitioners in science, unless a practitioner is committed to learning.)

Building credibility with the technologist also means that one must research similar products, if any, and compare differences and similarities. This takes time. Often, inventors do not want delay and a practitioner must use personal skills to get the time to verify what the inventor is alleging. If a technologist refuses to grant time, something is amiss. Stampeding to the press is a common tactic among con men who create a sensation, collect investment money then disappear. Respected technologists can fall into the stampede mentality because they want the glory of being first, they need money or they want to be first to market. This puts enormous pressure on the practitioner to speed investigation, and it is easy to slip up while doing so. One must insist on taking the time to get the story right.

Accuracy is not narrowly defined either. It tones down excessive statements or surrounds them with facts to frame them. Accuracy talks down amazed reporters and others who go overboard. It tells them what needs to happen before a technology takes hold. It builds a road map for the emergence of a technology in the marketplace. It eschews “what ifs” in favor of “what is.” It states what needs to happen and the probabilities of that happening rather than glossing over the realities with speculation. Scientists approach their announcements this way most of the time. It is caution borne out of uncertainty. On the other hand, I recall a scientist turned promoter of a technology who dismissed questions

about development as trivial engineering problems. Later I learned that another company had spent a billion dollars on these trivial problems without resolving them.

Preventing technology hype, however, is dismissed as pie-in-the-sky idealism by PR practitioners driven by growth. To them, money is more important than reality. They will flog anyone’s point of view and then attempt to distance themselves from those who prove to be wrong. The cynicism of this approach is regrettable and shortsighted. Lest these practitioners think that they are getting away with what they are doing, they’re not. Journalists can be fooled once, but they are careful not to be fooled twice. I believe many PR practitioners associated with dot-com failures regret the enthusiasm they showed for technologies that never made money and never went anywhere. I suspect as they hunt for jobs they are telling themselves the next time they will be more careful. They need to remember that care starts with accuracy.

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