

The “Ten Commandments” of Nano-Communication – or how to deal with public perception

Dr. Christoph Meili, CEO, The Innovation Society Ltd, St.Gallen (Switzerland)

Protest, profit and perception!

A handful of people protested in front of the Eddie Bauer flagship store on Michigan Avenue in Chicago in May 2005. They were protesting against the company's use of untested “nano-fibers” in their “nanotex” clothing by showing their painted bodies covered with slogans like: “Plenty of room at the bottom” or “Say the truth about nanotechnology at Eddie Bauer”. T.H.O.N.G (Topless Humans Organized for natural Genetics) had good media coverage with the action.



Since the ETC-Group called for a moratorium on synthetic nanoparticles in the year 2003; a risk debate among experts was launched while in most countries the public debate had not started yet.

The general public attitude towards Nanotechnology is positive but the general knowledge about nanotechnology is poor. More than 54% of the people in the US know nothing about it. That's likely to change as nanotech's potential turns into more products. If these products prove to be more beneficial than hazardous the acceptance will increase. Having learned the lessons from other technology debates (GM, biotechnology and genetic engineering) it's crucial to understand the general patterns of perception and communication. The following “Ten Commandments” should serve as a guideline to better understanding of public perception and lead to better communication strategies.

1: “High tech needs high trust”

Behind every debate about modern technology there is the question of trust in the end. Can citizens be sure that they are not cheated by politicians, industry or scientists? Can they be sure, that their confidence isn't misused. The trust in industry, politicians, and governments is on a historical low-level. Consumers trust the most to NGO's. When it comes to the acceptance of technology the trustworthiness of the involved stakeholders is key.

→ *Communication is the key to increase public trust. It has to be personal, honest, transparent and open, covering benefits and risks.*

2: “Science doesn't create public trust – people do”

When arguing about potential benefits and threats of a technology experts often argue with scientific studies and arguments. Scientific arguments don't create trust. On the contrary: Listening to the experts contradictory arguments laymen often feel puzzled and more troubled in the long run. In the worst case this leads to rejection and boycott. The public doesn't trust arguments but people, and trust is given to those people or organisations who are believed to act in the same way they would do.

→ *Stakeholder's reputation and credibility is more important to the public than sophisticated arguments.*

3: “Media love Nanotechnology”

When it comes to emerging technology people rely on cognitive shortcuts and heuristics. Media coverage of nanotechnology provides a key heuristic to audiences. One of the strongest effects of media coverage is based on media-framing, the way contents are presented. And after all: Media love nano: More than 70% of media coverage about nano is positive:

→ *Media love nano. Give them the stories before somebody else does!*

4: “Values create views”

The massive occurrence of data is challenging to consumers when it comes to complex technologies. Which are the stable anchoring points when decisions have to be made under a high degree of uncertainty, a lack of information and in even shorter time? It's values. They become the anchoring point in decision-making processes. Personal values are individually consistent, time stable and probably most important - can be communicated to justify a decision

7th Dec. 2005, San Francisco

towards anybody. Consumer's decisions are based on intuition more and more, which are mainly based on personal attitudes and values.

→ *Individual values are becoming more relevant in decision making processes. They are key to the consumer acceptance of technology*

5: "Communication ≠ information"

The well known equation: "More information → more acceptance" proved to be wrong. The causality between degree of information and acceptance is even negative. The educational level of GMO-critics e.g. is higher. There is no use in trying to attempt acceptance by additional information. Industry's information campaigns are perceived as manipulative and PR-driven.

→ *Lack of technology acceptance is not an information- but a communication problem.*

6: "Perception is reality"

Human risk perception seems to be complicated and often irrational. (The smoker's fear of the snake bite"). Patterns of risk-perception can't be manipulated because they aren't constructed individually. Moreover they are the result of an evolutionary process. The concept has proven to be suitable for all kinds of every-day threats. The common character of these concepts gives us a useful tool for a common orientation and the opportunity to establish common understandable frameworks of communication.

→ *There is no use trying to manipulate risk perception frames. Better harness them.*

7: "Hype creates frustration"

Utopian Nano-scientists are occasionally claiming that nanotechnology will clean up environment, eradicate world poverty and free human from disease, ageing and probably death in the future. If nanotechnology is described in this way the media will hype it up and make people believe that these "Nano-dreams" will become true. Disappointment is highly toxic to public acceptance

→ *Don't hype it up and avoid disappointed customers.*

8: "Balancing benefits and risks"

If the public is to weigh up the risks and benefits of nanotechnology, it must know and understand the realistic benefits. If there are risks to be taken then the product has to have tangible benefits for the customers. Industry has to show useful products with remarkable benefits.

→ *One sided information breeds suspicions.*

9: "Nano-inside? Consumers want to be informed"

Consumers want to be informed and want to know what's in the products they are buying.

→ *Tag your Nano-products with a Nano-Label and build trust and a good PR*

10: "Regulators and regulations don't create public trust"

Recent studies have shown that trust in regulatory agencies and political entities are generally low. Many people don't know much about the activities or regard them as suspicious of the industry. The recent Swiss plebiscite for a GM-Food-moratorium has shown a low public trust despite very strict regulations.

→ *Governmental agencies and regulators have to improve their communication strategies to gain trust.*

Die Innovationsgesellschaft (The Innovation Society) / St.Gallen, Switzerland

Is a Swiss based consulting company focused on strategic Risk, Innovation Management and Communication Issues. Customers are public and private companies, federal authorities and research organisations, active in the application and implementation of new technologies. A major focus is nanotechnology.

The company has recently launched the first international-stakeholder-platform on Nanotechnology and regulation (www.nanoregulation.ch) and has organised the first International conference on regulatory issues in fall 2005. (www.nanoeurope.com)

Contact:

Dr. Christoph Meili

Die Innovationsgesellschaft mbH
Lerchenfeldstr. 5,
CH-9014 St.Gallen

Fon: +41 (0) 71 274 74 17
Mob: +41 (0) 76 326 77 97

Mail: christoph.meili@innovationsgesellschaft.ch
Web: www.innovationsgesellschaft.ch