

Making your Science Work for You

by Risa Schulman, Ph.D.

Getting Practical

The science behind the industry's ingredients and products has been rightfully taking center stage in its product development efforts. It's something to be very proud of, a mark of seriousness in the industry as its products get hotter but also more sophisticated. Yet using the science well is still a formidable task that spans the whole development and launch process. It takes a multifaceted approach involving the science-regulatory-marketing axis along the way to make your science work for you. Let's look at some of the nuts and bolts that will help you make this happen.

Cataloguing Your Science

It's hard to get started if you don't know what you are working with, so all those journal articles, internal reports, conference abstracts and sometimes even analytical data need to be brought together into one place. This may also require literature searches to see what else is out there and acquiring those references. Once they are together, the best practice is to keep the papers in an electronic archive that is referenced usefully and to have a bibliography prepared. It is a huge step just to be able to see what you have in a concrete way. Many companies are aware of their science, but don't really have their hands around what it is. Now you will have it available at your fingertips for all the tasks ahead.

Extracting What is Useful

Whenever possible, it is best to understand your science very early in the development process. After the papers have been gathered and catalogued, they should be compiled into a table of useful information, including study details, results and potential value-adds for the product, which can be updated as new studies become available. This should, ideally, be done by someone who has a deep understanding of science, but also some grasp of regulatory parameters and the business goals. This will help to pull out the information that is relevant, and to note it in a way that will make it useful for upcoming marketing and regulatory efforts.

Making separate areas in the table for work that has been done on your ingredient or product specifically versus that done on someone else's can sometimes be important to help identify gaps in your science and to assess the strength of evidence for claims. Furthermore, the table will help the team to visualize the science available, which will help to design a product story that is solidly built upon the real merits of the product, making message development and claim substantiation much easier down the road. It avoids getting far down the development pathway with a vague assurance that the very exciting product story you're running with has science behind it, only to find out (sometimes long after launch) that this is not the case.

So how exactly do you go about assessing your science and making it most useful? Below is a series of questions that will help to frame messaging with strong science behind it. Your science should ideally be a focused benefit or benefits with strong substantiation that matter (or you can make matter) to the consumer.

How much scientific evidence is there for a given benefit and how strong is it? [For an explanation of what to consider and what constitutes strong science according to FDA, see "Guidance for Industry: Evidence-Based Review System for the Scientific Evaluation of Health Claims - Final"]

How many different benefits does my product have? Do some have better science than others?

Of what interest are these benefits to the consumer?

Is the benefit understandable to the consumer or will I have to educate?

Do I have the budget to launch an education program?

Do I have the budget to do more research to bolster benefits that do not have enough science?

The answers to these questions will inform every aspect of your product development—claims, target market, messaging, brand personality, package design and launch timeline.

Turning the Science into Marketing Language

This is where things get trickier. The science person will tell you all about the data in detail; the marketing person will want to create strong messages about appealing benefits; the regulatory person will try to rein in both and instead present stiff and unconvincing DSHEA-speak. This is why it is critical to have the three teams work together and hash it out to come to an agreement on the exact messaging and product story. The final messaging is always a compromise, but it will ideally be scientifically accurate, regulatory-compliant and compelling to the consumer. Then the messages that come out of each department's work will be coordinated and make a powerful impact through the various communications forms (packaging, website, press releases, trade and sales materials).

Using the science well is what is going to keep this industry strong and growing, not just in dollars, but in credibility and long-term contribution to the health revolution that is unfolding before our eyes. Our earnest struggles with how to understand, use and communicate our science will pay off in rich and satisfying dividends down the road.

A Quick Guide to Pitfalls in Analyzing Your Science:

A=B and B=C does NOT always mean A=C

Getting impressed by a large number of animal studies

Extrapolating benefits from: very preliminary data, suggested but unproven mechanisms

Seeing what isn't there/not seeing what is there

Having your conclusions about your science live "in the air" rather than documenting them with their substantiation

Designing new studies in the absence of understanding the science you already have

Make sure all involved team members are aware of what there is to work with and why.

Risa Schulman, Ph.D., is a functional food and dietary supplement expert, professional speaker and writer. She is president of Tap~Root , a consulting company focusing on health claim substantiation, product development and business strategy. She can be contacted at: risa@tap-root.biz.