

Social Science: Online networks gain biotech traction

BY LISA VAN DER POOL
JOURNAL STAFF

Social networking Web sites have long been a popular escape for generations X and Y. Now those online communities are gaining traction with scientists who work with X and Y chromosomes, among other organic materials.

For the first time; attendees at the annual BIO International Convention can post personalized pages, detailing everything from resume details to movie preferences, on the conference affiliated social networks. The BIO branded groups, hosted by the already popular **Facebook** and LinkedIn sites, aim to harness the marketing power offered by online communities and enable attendees to network prior to the June convention.

Some say the conference's success so far is an early indicator that such sites will play an important, and relatively low-cost, role in shaping the biotech industry's multibillion-dollar marketing segment. Around 3,100 prospective BIO attendees – mostly biotech researchers, executives and attorneys – have registered as members within those communities, and roughly a quarter of those participants hail from or work in Massachusetts.

"I think it's very savvy for (BIO) to be doing this, this year," said **Jeff Scalzi**, director of marketing at the Boston based law firm of **Foley Hoag LLP**, and a LinkedIn BIO group member.

The networking program's value for both BIO and its attendees has yet to be determined, although social networking sites in general are already frequented by scientists. In a survey of 458 scientists, half said they use social sites to facilitate the sharing of ideas with the scientific community.

"I would be surprised if a lot of senior executives signed on but I do think it's the wave of the future," said **Hugh Kennedy**, executive vice president and partner at Cambridge-based **PJA Advertising & Marketing**. PJA, which creates advertising campaigns for a variety of biotechnology and health care clients, conducted the survey with the assistance of research concern **BioInformatics LLC** in Arlington, Va.

Linking Labs

Social media is considered a technical improvement on what scientists have always done to further their research. In a recent poll, biotech insiders said they were most aligned with the following values.

22% Allows me to make a more educated decision about purchasing new products and/or technologies.

50% Facilitates the sharing of ideas with colleagues within the scientific community.

23% Makes it easier to research new products and technologies.

Source: BioInformatics LLC and PJA

"I think in a few years what BIO is doing will be standard at conferences," Kennedy continued. "One important thing to remember about this audience is that scientists really were the originators of what today we call online discussion groups."

At press time there were close to 3,060 members on BIO's Facebook and LinkedIn groups.

Typical attendee postings include information concerning resume details, hobbies and personal preferences.

Brands using social networking sites is a growing trend among advertisers. Marketers are expected to spend about \$1.6 billion in social spaces this year, a 69 percent increase over 2007, which saw advertisers shell out about \$920 million, according to **eMarketer Inc.**

While BIO's Facebook and LinkedIn groups mark the conference's first foray into public social networking sites as a marketing tool, the conference's planners did host a similar service last year.

The so-called "MyBIO" offering enabled attendees to exchange information and plan out event schedules before the event in Boston.

'What's helpful about this group is...you can quickly identify certain types of people you want to interact with.'

Pearl Freier

President of Cambridge BioPartners

BIO will again launch MyBIO in March.

The conference licenses the technology from Baltimore-based **BD Metrics Inc.**, a company that markets "YouBased" personalization technology for the tradeshow industry.

"Everything that we do is based on increasing the value for the attending community," said **Margaret Core**, director of sales and marketing for Bio.

Pearl Freier, president of the R&D recruiting firm **Cambridge BioPartners**, and a member of BIO's planning committee, notes that having the BIO logo on a LinkedIn profile could potentially connect fellow biotech executives who might be more likely to respond to a message or request linked to a common brand affiliation.

BIO's LinkedIn Group "is tremendously valuable in terms of people being able to build relationships before the meeting," said Freier.

"What's helpful about this group is... you can quickly identify certain types of people you want to interact with," she said.

Laurie Halloran, CEO of **Halloran Consulting Group** in Brighton, recently joined the BIO LinkedIn group, and sees the potential of the group in the run up to the convention.

"It's a fantastic planning tool to make your time at BIO the most productive it can possibly be," said Halloran.

LISA VAN DER POOL can be reached at lvanderpool@bizjournals.com.