

# It Takes Merchandising To Tell the Science Story

**Robert E. Enlow**

The British Broadcasting Corporation called a USDA research leader in Peoria--yes, Peoria--Illinois, in September for information about plants that yield botanochemicals.

Such "botanochemicals" as rubber, oils and waxes could be grown from 34 of more than 300 plant species studied in USDA laboratories. And they could replace scarce petrochemicals.

The tipoff to BBC probably originated with an Associated Press wire story by Wayne Slater at Peoria. The wire story stemmed from a press release written and merchandised by Dean Mayberry on our staff. He wrote it for a press briefing held at Peoria more than a year before the BBC overseas call.

That incident illustrates several points of interest to a supervisor of research reporters who merchandise science news and feature stories:

First, a relevant science news story keeps on keeping on --if it is reported clearly, interestingly, accurately, and with follow-through.

Second, a research reporter does not have to be headquartered in New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles to get a story told nationally or internationally. He can be located in Peoria, Illinois.

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**Remarks by Robert E. Enlow, regional information officer  
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Third, a research reporter must be inventive in writing and merchandising a science story. He may even create a new term—botanochemicals—as a more descriptive, parallel term to petrochemicals. The coined term helps sell the gatekeeper on using the story.

Fourth, a research reporter must match the right tools and approaches to each reporting event. He judges carefully whether he wants a media briefing, a conference, or either. He studies the source scientist to determine if he can handle a press event and if he needs some advance counselling. He also determines how well a press event will “play in Peoria,” and when it will play best.

A media briefing was chosen over a conference, and the time was set for 10:30 a.m., on a Tuesday, August 22. Media, primarily within a radius of 200 miles, were invited by letter and telephone. They were chosen on the basis of audiences to be reached (general public, farm, industry), the past interest they have shown in reporting science news, and proximity to Peoria. In addition, a notice of the briefing went out on the state AP wire.

But, let's back up a step or two.

Four press releases were prepared, each for a different audience, in advance of the briefing. Photographs were taken of the principal scientists with such unique potential crops as poinsettia, sow thistle, milkweed and quackgrass. These were among the 34 plant species screened from pesky weeds, exotic ornamentals and common wild plants. All of this added to human interest and an opportunity for editors and reporters to write catchy headlines and lead paragraphs. The **Des Moines Register** ran a story headed: “Weed patch? No, “petroleum farm.””

A dozen media men and women attended the briefing; others telephoned in and asked that copies of press releases and photographs be sent to them. They represented wire services, all Peoria press and broadcast media, and reporters and editors of farm and industrial periodicals. Several hundred copies of the four press releases were mailed to magazine and newspaper editors. Their addresses were targeted and their labels printed through our computerized Selective Distribution System. That system matches the subject matter of a media release to specific media interests.

What was the outcome of the media briefing event?

Unfortunately, we have no national clipping service; however, we saw what we believe to be the tip of a huge iceberg. We know that 26 national, regional and local publications and

newspapers ran the story -- several with AP and UPI wire photos. Their combined circulation is 7,660,000. We know, also, that the scientists involved were put in touch with potential developers and users, previously unknown to them. Scientists were queried for technical support information by readers of periodicals throughout the United States and foreign lands. Included were requests from other scientists in the state, federal and private sectors; farm advisors and extension agents; and representatives of business and industry.

Perhaps the most interesting outcome is the cross section of media interests that surfaced. The story was told through AP and UPI and by such periodicals as **Smithsonian**, **Solar Energy Digest**, **Moneysworth**, **Chemistry**, **Design News**, **The Wall Street Journal**, **Chemical & Engineering News**, **Industrial Engineering**, and most state, regional and national farm publications. It also made all national radio networks. The **Des Moines Register** article, mentioned earlier, was syndicated to many large city dailies. For example, it appeared as a four-column spread, including 32 column inches, in the Sunday **Minneapolis Tribune**.

As a wrapup, I would like to stress follow-through in relation to special merchandising projects that, hopefully, provide continuity and overcome fragmentation. I have four public information officers on my staff charged with reporting the research of roughly 550 scientists at 27 research locations in the North Central Region. Periodically, each one of the information officers selects a research development that has news value and deserves extra emphasis and ongoing reporting. Botanochemicals is one. Research on maintaining grain quality and avoiding dust explosions is another. So is our research on super slurper, the highly absorbent modified starch discovered at Peoria. It is now used as root and seed coatings, as a soil conditioner in replanting disturbed lands, and in such human care products as diapers, bed pads, and ostomy bags.

Dean Mayberry named super slurper and has reported and merchandised this basic research product for several years. Now, as a probable coupe de grace, he has surveyed all of the companies that obtained licenses to develop uses for super slurper under USDA public patent. He heard from 16 sources in 13 states. In October we wrote two press releases based on uses to which developers are putting the product. A short one went to general interest outlets; the longer one went to media reaching special groups. Written in magazine

style, it contained a general two-page review followed by short reports about uses by the 16 sources. To encourage follow-up by media, Mayberry included the name, address, and telephone number of each of the 16 sources.

A special project of this type provides stature to the source scientists and expands their contacts with users of the development. It adds to the image of the agricultural research community. It maintains the identity of the source institution with the development in the minds of special groups and the general taxpaying public. And, it encourages early application of research results to the benefit of the public.