

### Communicating Science to the Public

#### Speaker

Susan E. Aiello, PhD, DVM, ELS / WordsWorld Consulting, Townsend, TN

#### By Katherine Feemster, MPH

As medical writers, we have a responsibility to our audiences to provide scientifically sound and readily understandable information. That role is often a difficult one to navigate—not only is it fraught with potential pitfalls, but it is also one of enormous responsibility. Dr Susan Aiello gave a presentation focused on this responsibility at the AMWA regional conference in Fort Meyers, Florida, this past June. “Communicating Science to the Public” shed light on those intricacies and the importance of the role medical communicators play.

To begin with, medical writers should ask themselves a series of questions:

- On a philosophical level: why can this be so hard? Well, we all have diverse backgrounds, with varying educations, interests, and needs. This goes not just for us as writers, but also (and perhaps specifically) for our audiences. What may be obvious to one is not necessarily obvious to another.
- On a societal level: why is this type of communication important? Medical communicators help protect the public’s health. When done well, our work contributes to societal advancement and scientific education.
- On a personal level: why is it important for you? What are your goals? Do you work to educate others, to influence policy, and/or to advocate for change?

The underlying theme for all these levels is trust—trust in our own abilities to provide accurate and valid information in a clear, understandable way, trust in us by our audiences and clients, and trust in the science by the general public. As the often-faceless go-betweens of the scientific and medical communities and the general public, our ability to parse and describe is the foundation of the trust between these groups.

To facilitate that trust, just like with the questions we must ask ourselves as we develop our projects, our audiences ask themselves their own questions.

- The general public asks, “How does this affect me?”
- Policy makers and/or scientists ask, “Does this affect my work?” or “Should we fund this?”
- The media asks, “Is this newsworthy?”

As we address these concerns, we should always remember that building trust between different groups and communities is essential.

The first piece of advice is to know your audience. How are they, in general, most likely to approach the topic? Is there skepticism or open-mindedness? Are they perhaps predisposed to be hostile or accepting of the information? The tone, the language, and the anticipated audience engagement are all 3 highly relevant aspects we can use to help guide our writing. We need to tailor our messages as much as possible toward the specific audiences.

Second, a helpful hint (particularly when addressing the general public) is to “think in threes.” Consider the general parts of good storytelling, or even of something as simple and familiar as a knock-knock joke: an event or incident intrigues people, a conflict arises from that event, and then a resolution is achieved. Using a familiar and generally accepted pattern goes just that little bit further in helping audiences remember the information that is presented.

To expand our audience reach, interacting with the media is sometimes a necessity, and one that involves its own skill set. You should make the assumption that if there is a way for the media to misinterpret the information you are providing, it is likely to happen. Reasons for that are that the media world moves very quickly, journalists have a variety of sources at their disposal, and news organizations in general are not good at covering long-term issues. To overcome these hurdles, be sure to provide accurate, clear, and concise information. In short, get to the point as soon as you can. Try not to provide extraneous information that could either muddle the topic or be misconstrued in edited sound or video clips. The “thinking in threes” rule of thumb for general audiences is also helpful when speaking with members of the media. Your points can be preplanned and even rehearsed (depending on your level of experience or comfort with public speaking). In any case, make sure to point out the big picture of the topic or research. And remember, if you don’t want to hear it, see it, or read it, don’t say it. There really is no such thing as off-the-record.

Remember that science changes over time; it evolves. Scientists accept this environment, but the general public often tends to view science and health news more often with nervousness and mistrust. Explain results clearly and concisely, and then present the possibilities of what comes next in order to build that necessary trust. That in turn makes medical writers more effective liaisons between the scientific world and the general public.

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## Jam Session for Early- to Mid-Career Freelancers

### Session Moderator

**Jennifer Minarcik, MS** / Principal, Jennifer Minarcik Biomedical Communications, LLC, Moorestown, NJ

### By Suzanne Morris, DVM, MWC

About 15 freelancers and freelancers-to-be gathered at the AMWA 2022 Southeast Regional Conference in June to share their early freelance career experiences. Some of the participants had just decided to take the freelance plunge and were eager for tips on setting up a new business whereas others with more experience were wanting to share lessons learned. Session facilitator Jennifer Minarcik, MS, started the discussion by divulging some of the assumptions she had when she first started her freelancing career. She spoke to the misperception that freelance medical writers are all in competition with each other by pointing out the diversity of medical writing genres represented by the session's participants.

Acknowledging that the varied nature of freelance medical writing lends to camaraderie rather than competitiveness among freelance medical writers led to a discussion of networking. Although making connections with other freelancers may not translate to immediate work, networking can develop leads, elevate a freelancer's marketplace presence, and unearth other benefits. One of the more valuable of these benefits may be finding a good mentor. The more experienced session participants extolled the benefits of mentorship in guiding their early freelancing careers. But how does a new freelancer go about finding a mentor? Those who had who have benefitted from mentorship described a relationship which naturally developed from a networking connection.

Another early career misstep Minarcik discussed was the compulsion to take on every project, and the consequent erosion of the work-personal life border. Minarcik and the other more seasoned freelancers agreed that project selectivity fosters a reasonable work schedule and, potentially, better clients. Because part of cultivating a work-life balance entails supporting work hour productivity, the discussion then turned to productivity strategies. For example, creating a schedule with built-in time to respond to distractions like emails supports productivity during work hours. Protecting work time also may require establishing boundaries with clients by responding to clients only during set work hours or at set times during the week.

The conversation turned to some of the other nuts-and-bolts of running a freelance business. As with most freelance medical writing discussions, the topic of contracts arose, albeit briefly. The take-home message for new freelancers was to carefully review contracts, particularly with respect to payment parameters. Some of the freelancer participants who were just forming their businesses asked for advice on insurance and accounting. The responses from the more seasoned participants were mixed—few had insurance, and several used accounting services and software. But the consensus was that some form of accounting assistance was very helpful.

Inevitably, the discussion turned to what may be the most daunting aspect of freelance medical writing or freelancing in general: marketing. The importance of presence online, particularly on platforms like LinkedIn, was discussed at length by several seasoned freelancers. For introverts averse to overt self-promotion, a less intimidating approach may be simply posting about topics of interest, which creates an online presence and can garner attention. Another strategy was to investigate companies associated with relevant forms of medical writing on LinkedIn and make connections with their employees. Whether to solicit potential clients through email was a point of debate, with the more experienced freelancers advising that if done, it should be targeted and could backfire by annoying the targeted client. The discussion of marketing repeatedly circled back to value of networking, which can be done online and in person through, for example, AMWA events. And in keeping with its overriding theme, this AMWA session ended with participants exchanging their business cards.

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## Public Relations in Medical Communication

### Speaker

**Katrina R. Burton, BS** / Public Relations Program Director

### By Lisa Kuhns, PhD

According to the Public Relations Society of America, organizations and their publics use public relations as a communication strategy to build relationships that are mutually beneficial. Medical communicators help educate the public by sharing relevant health information through their own writing, and those with a marketing and public relations