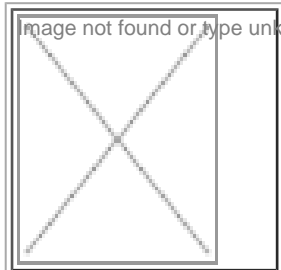


Need awareness to tackle misinformation

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Dr Usha Zehr

Chief technical officer and joint director of research, Mahyco

An expert geneticist, Dr Zehr has been the brain behind the development of Bt brinjal at Mahyco. She serves on a number of boards, including the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation and the Mahyco Research Foundation, and is a member of the technical advisory committee of the consultative group on International Agricultural Research.

The Indian economy is booming and so is the biotech sector. The country witnessed reasonable growth in biotechnology over the past few years and has the potential to grow significantly in the coming years. The agriculture biotechnology sector has seen growth as a result of the cotton technologies, basic research and diagnostic tools developed, but pharma biotechnology has seen a much stronger growth. Potential for agriculture biotechnology is equally good. Many new products are at their final stages of development and regulatory approvals.

India is ranked among the top 12 biotechnology destinations worldwide and is the third largest in the Asia-Pacific region. The biotechnology sector grew by 21.5 percent in 2010-11 to cross the \$4 billion mark, as revealed by an annual survey conducted by BioSpectrum and The Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises (ABLE). It is interesting to note that most of the companies operating in the biotech sector today are largely dominated by private players. The agri-biotech sector has also been dominated by products from the private sector. Given India's scientific talent pool, resources and basic infrastructure, the opportunity for improving our global potential is big.

Among the various challenges faced by the biotech sector, those related to marketing challenges are critical, which have to be identified and addressed at different levels, to enable smooth flow of products and services to the target audience at the right time and right place. The biggest challenge of developing an agri-biotech product, to be planted in the fields, is the time taken to develop it. India has a stringent regulation in place for biotech products. The current system for product development can take more than 10 years. The introduction of Bollgard and Bollgard II was an excellent learning in terms of what was needed for a biotech product introduction as compared to what we had been doing since the beginning of the seed industry.

The key challenges for the industry are:

- Creating awareness about biotech products, which will include extension activities.
- Tackling misinformation spread due to lack of knowledge or by vested interests.
- Awareness building with various stakeholder groups.
- Understanding the need for use of biotechnology.
- Ensuring that the policy environment facilitating product development processes is efficient.
- Managing farmer expectations with regard to agri-biotech products.

Given the long time it takes to develop a genetically modified (GM) product, it is critical that the regulatory approval process established is rigorous and timely. The Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India Bill (BRAI), currently under discussion, aims to provide a single-window facility for clearance of biotech products. The agri-biotech industry welcomes regulations that will enable timely examination and approval of products for the benefit of the agricultural community.

Since biotech products, particularly GM products, are relatively less understood, the key challenge is creating better understanding and credibility at the initial stage. India's agriculture has been able to keep up with the demands on food grains and it has been supplemented by imports as needed, particularly in pulses and oils. However, as we look to the future requirements and our diminishing resources of land, water and potential impacts due to climate change, we need to be looking at tools for addressing the demand. Creating this awareness is critical to the future of biotech products.

Communication is the urgent need

Biotech product development is a complex process. This requires extensive explanation of product features, action and benefits before customers fully understand the need for them.

When connected with a sensitive industry like biotechnology, it becomes extremely important to build credibility and convey facts. Typically, scientists have not been engaged in communication activities but this is very much needed to engage various stakeholders.

Mahyco has been marketing seeds since 1964 and enjoys farmers' trust, for which we are grateful for. The biotech products challenge us to improve our communication and also the stakeholders that we need to engage with. Traditionally, our communication was primarily restricted to the farming community directly. With biotech products, the stakeholder groups are not just farmers, but include consumer groups, students and policy makers, and the communication needs have to be fit for the respective groups.

At Mahyco, we dedicate our efforts to educate the stakeholders via direct outreach, thus, making an effort to communicate the company's message in a simplified manner. Our marketing messages focus on the challenges faced by India's agriculture, the farmer and what solutions are possible and how biotechnology tools will play a key role in that.

Overcoming each of these phases has been a rich learning experience that has helped us develop world-class expertise in biotechnology. Biotech products require a distinctly different kind of marketing. It is important to recognize the unique place that these cutting-edge products have in the marketplace and appreciate the changes they can bring about in the country. Successful launch of these products will bring tremendous benefits to farmers, consumers and the nation as a whole.