

Experimenting with Success

BioToasters helps scientists overcome fear of public speaking.

BY PETER A. BALASKAS

Being a scientist is more than just exploring the unknown and making calculations. A scientist must harness data and present it in a way that a diverse audience will not only understand, but will also appreciate and act upon. Which is where BioToasters comes in. The San Diego, California, club has gained widespread attention for helping scientists come out of their proverbial shells, share their findings and experience the joy of public speaking.

In November, the club was featured on NPR (National Public Radio), as part of the program *Weekend Edition Saturday*. Reporter Claire Trageser visited the club and interviewed members for the segment, titled “From Lab to Lectern, Scientists Learn to Turn on the Charm.”

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— Zhihong O’Brien, CC

Members spoke of how they are working to improve their communication skills, both in academic arenas and social settings. It’s valuable practice, because scientists often toil in isolation, club president Zackary Prag told Trageser.

“For a typical scientist, they will spend a lot of time at the bench, doing calculations or lab work where they’re not interacting directly, from person to person,” said Prag, a lab-equipment sales representative.

Another one of the members, Gina Salazar, has a Ph.D. in biomedical engineering and is seeking a job. She knows that job-interview and communication skills are key. Salazar has been practicing her speaking in the club, including practicing a eulogy she would give at her mother’s funeral.

“Salazar’s newfound confidence and poise shows just what the group can do,” said the reporter as she ended the NPR segment. “While she’s still looking for a job, Salazar has become a better speaking scientist.”

Good Move

BioToasters draws members from the biotech, high-tech and finance industries. Last year the club relocated to the headquarters of Proven Inc., an employment staffing firm—a move that proved



Zackary Prag, club president of BioToasters, is a sales associate at BioSurplus, a San Diego provider of lab equipment.



The BioToasters club helps science professionals learn to relax when communicating with an audience.

to be a boon for the group. Notices posted about the club meetings caught the attention of a steady flow of scientists visiting the firm to seek employment and career guidance. Sometimes these scientists caught a glimpse of a club meeting in session, and many eventually visited the club and became members.

In interviews with the *Toastmaster* magazine, members sang the praises of BioToasters, which meets at lunchtime. The club “helps propel those who are already in the lab to develop leadership and discover their voice,” says club president Prag.

Scientists face the same obstacles as other professionals when it comes to communication and public speaking, but they often face the additional challenge of having to present complex data to a non-technical audience. A lack of experience and training in communication can damage a scientist’s career, says Zhihong O’Brien, CC, club treasurer. A non-native English speaker from China, O’Brien excelled in her technical abilities but her lack of communication and presentation skills endangered career promotions.

“I think having excellent communication skills is a very important part of being a great scientist,” she says. “In today’s highly competitive world, solely focusing on lab work is no longer enough.”

Prag says his fear of public speaking grew when he went from being a lab analyst to a sales associate at BioSurplus, a provider of used lab equipment. He felt comfortable communicating one-on-one with customers, but when it came to speaking in front of a group or giving a presentation, Prag’s fear intensified with each passing second.

“For me, the obstacles were comfort and confidence,” he says. “I realized my own niche—my ability to communicate with scientists and also with people of various backgrounds—but I needed to hone my skill of public speaking through practice and feedback, and that is what brought me to Toastmasters.”

Making Connections

BioToasters has helped members learn to relax and to connect with their audience. Of special value to the group is learning to adapt and use impromptu techniques to engage the audience, especially when these scientists speak “too technically” and the information goes over the heads of their audience members. Octavio Espinosa, ACB, CL, says this skill has helped him in his role as senior director of marketing and sales at BioSurplus.

For example, a boss may ask for an impromptu opinion on a subject or an interviewer may ask the classic question “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

“In the end, the growth is measured by a higher degree of comfort and confidence in tackling such situations,” says Espinosa, the club’s vice president membership.

O’Brien not only boosted her communication skills, she also developed newfound leadership skills that resulted in her being promoted to supervisor and project team representative at a biopharmaceutical company. She now provides impromptu project-status updates at departmental meetings, manages project activities and hosts group meetings. “I truly gained confidence as a scientist to lead scientific projects and lead task force members to successfully tackle many issues,” she says.

Other club successes include a scientist who was painfully shy but was able to tap into his talent as a humorous speaker and become a speech contest winner. Courtesy of the rising achievements displayed by its members, as well as the club’s increased market exposure on the radio, BioToasters is proving itself to be a successful experiment for scientific speakers. ■

For more information about the BioToasters club, visit www.BioToasters.org.

To listen to the NPR segment about the club, go to <http://ow.ly/sOvh3>.

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SPEAKING CHAMP OFFERS TIPS IN NEW BOOK

In the book *Emote: Using Emotions to Make Your Message Memorable*, Vikas Jhingran, the 2007 World Champion of Public Speaking, explores an emotion-based approach to verbal communication. The workshops he often hosts involve this style of speaking. But more than 10 years ago, the concept of public speaking frightened Jhingran. And as a scientist, that was a handicap he knew he had to conquer.

In 2002, he joined Sysco Toastmasters in Houston, Texas. He gained confidence and improved his speech organization. Jhingran,



Vikas Jhingran, Ph.D.

who earned his Ph.D. in ocean engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), then developed techniques to harness his emotions to enhance his presentations even more, making his messages more memorable.

“I sometimes feel that scientists hide behind equations during presentations,” he says. “I am worried about the opposite. I am worried that my audience will not be able

to look beyond the equations and truly understand the crux of my research findings.”

Jhingran became such a compelling speaker that, after years of practice and participating in speech contests, he won the 2007 Toastmasters World Championship of Public Speaking. He was the first East Indian and the second Asian to win the annual competition.

Jhingran now works for Shell Oil Company in Houston and has been a member of Speaking of Shell Toastmasters. As the company’s team lead in the Deepwater Projects Organization, Jhingran has benefitted from his communication skills in many ways. As a researcher, he clearly explains abstract concepts to fellow engineers. As a designer, he successfully communicates technical information to nontechnical audiences. As a team leader, Jhingran manages his colleagues and the operations of his division with ease, as well as creates a communication protocol for projects worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

Jhingran’s book *Emote* was published by Career Press in January. He hopes that what he learned from Toastmasters will be passed on to fellow scientists.

“Technical professionals and researchers will greatly benefit from working on their verbal communication skills,” he says. “It will help them find a job, promote their ideas and stand out [among] a crowd of very smart people.”

For more information about Jhingran, visit www.vikasjhingran.com.

