

Snake Oil Sellers...

Why is it always that when I meet people at parties and they ask me what I do for a living, I find myself defending the cosmetic industry? I only have to tell them that I measure the efficacy of cosmetics and immediately a lady that is about to hit the menopausal age will bend over to me, and ask “Do you really believe that antiwrinkle creams work? Which one should I use?” How often is a car salesman asked whether the car he sells really drives? And you all know how we trust those people! Are we the ultimate snake oil salesmen of industry? Whether we like it or not, we have a credibility problem with our customers. We tell them beautiful stories and give them wonderful products, but in one way or another, our stories are more wonderful than our products, as our customers keep telling us subsequently that we sell “Hope in a Bottle.” But we also think this is simply unfair because we generated all this beautiful evidence that our product really worked.

But did we really? Last month I was at In-Cosmetics in Barcelona, as probably most of you were. As always, it was a great show, the worst thing being the weather, and even that cleared up dramatically over the three days of the event. I attended both the Conference and the Exhibition. Prof. Morganti had gone a long way in trying to obtain a multidisciplinary group of speakers

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consisting of dermatologists, cosmetic scientists and even some cosmetic surgeons. The audience listened to talks discussing a wide variety of subjects such as retinoid receptors, the role of ceramides and the latest developments in skin whitening mechanisms, and the discussions following the presentations were more lively than I have come across at any prior In-Cosmetics. This promised to be a good conference!

But then, all of a sudden this snake oil seller appeared who described a product of such fantastic qualities that you could legitimately ask yourself how we ever survived the last two millennia without it. It was active in at least 20 different fields, ranging from moisturizing to antiaging, from cholesterol-reducing to skin-whitening. After having spent 25% of the available time listing all benefits of this new miraculous ingredient without any evidence, the presenter could only illustrate two specific activities and focused on moisturization and antiwrinkling aspects of this remarkable new ingredient. For the first activity, all we were given was the following statement: “Moisturization increased by 18% relative to control as measured by the Corneometer,” and for the antiwrinkling activity we were shown two microrelief photographs, one taken before and one taken after treatment.

Unfortunately for the snake oil presenter, there was a dermatologist in the audience who asked whether TEWL values had been recorded. He almost had to explain what transepidermal water loss was. No, that was not done. Did you take any biopsies by any change? After all, you could incorporate 12% sodium lauryl sulfate in the mildest cream available and get a beautiful antiwrinkling effect due to local oedema formation. No, that was not done either. The audience was left with the feeling that this antiwrinkling aspect of the new wonder ingredient was not that good after all. The evidence was not complete, to put it mildly. There was no delivery on the promise. How about the claim of 18% increase in moisturization, then? It was quickly calculated for the presenter who clearly had never seen Corneometer values, that the type of skin being discussed would have values around 30 to 40, but the audience was being kind to the snake oil seller. Pre-treatment values were set at 50. Add 18%, i.e., 9, and

you go from 50 to 59. In other words, you go from dry skin to dry skin. Another failure to deliver on the promise. To make things even worse, Prof. Morganti made the best comment of the whole conference: “It is OK for suppliers to make claims for new ingredients, but could they please provide sufficient evidence to substantiate them?” In other words, could we please deliver on our promises?

This was just one talk, but things only got worse during the afternoon session. In my opinion it is a disgrace for people who pay money to attend these talks to have such cosmetic rubbish being poured over them. If you would like to make a snake oil presentation, then buy a slot in the free communications session and sell your snake oil ingredient. But do not complain when your clients start complaining to you that you’ve only been selling “Hope in a Bottle.” During cosmetic science conferences for which an admission fee is asked, attendees should be listening to cosmetic research, where the promises are actually delivered.

How do we in the cosmetic industry get away from the customer perception that we are selling “Hope in a Bottle?” Just to get things straight, I would like to stress that I found this the best In-Cosmetics conference that I ever attended. A series of plans is being prepared for conferences that are organized in conjunction with exhibitions to ensure that delegates will get value for money. One step forward would be that scientists should present their own work, not have their marketing colleagues do it for them. There are only two exceptions: those who long for the above-mentioned reception or those who really know what they are talking about. Whereas scientists will have no problem with the latter type of presenter, the real scientists among us could also be more aggressive and embarrass the former type of speakers to such a degree that they will not even think about presenting again unless they can deliver on their promises. Proper proofreading of submitted manuscripts and subsequently rejecting the snake oil papers would also help to lift the overall quality of such conferences. We in the industry only have ourselves to blame for our lack of credibility. It doesn’t matter if we sell snake oil cosmetics without having really well substantiated evidence, but if this is the case, we should not make any claims, not even snake oil claims! You