

## **From Storytelling to a Story Pool**

### **A proposal towards increasing the visibility of science and technology parks through coordination of PR activities**

#### **Executive Summary**

A close cooperation of PR within the framework of the IASP organisation would open up new perspectives to enhance the value of PR and make IASP members more visible internationally.

Science and technology parks (STP) are treasure troves of stories covering the fascinating process of the realisation of an idea. For this reason, we should establish a PR network to improve our international media relations. The following procedure would be conceivable:

- Making a list of the PR officers who are interested in cooperation
- Assisting each other in establishing story-pools (i.e. collections of ideas and stimuli for stories information that has the potential to encourage a journalist to write a story).
- Developing strategies in terms of international PR cooperation
- Establishing of an adequate forum to communicate (internet-based)
- Implementation of a pilot project to take up the proof of whether this proposal can be realised.

#### **Preconditions and Advantages of Cooperation**

Science and technology parks (STP) fulfil an important function in their respective countries. They were set up either to master the effects of structural changes in the economy or to advance the development of certain fields in high technology. Thus, it is fair to say, they are often the outcome of farsighted political decisions. This is somewhat paradoxical because they are usually state-planned and state-financed, but nevertheless present a runway for free market flights.

Science and technology parks each have very individual profiles, comparable to the human individual, with different talents and biographical backgrounds. They are wayward, nonconformist, and constantly in search of solutions for their respective assignments.

Science and technology parks, of course, compete with each other. Though they also have a common interest, as they all share common characteristics. This facilitates international comparison. Shared interests are easier to communicate.

Science and technology parks should have a vital interest in communication as a means of promoting their outstanding concepts, thus attracting investors as well as entrepreneurs as future tenants. At the same time, they are confronted with the inevitable responsibility to explain to the public, why it was necessary to build up science parks and why it was and continuously stays necessary to invest large amounts of public money there.

Private enterprises, as a matter of course, provide an appropriate budget for marketing activities as well as public relations (PR). They simply do this in order to identify and satisfy customer demands. A science park management, on the other hand, often lacks adequate funds to match elaborate marketing activities, such as displaying relevant ads or road shows in foreign countries. In view of this fact, PR gains increased significance.

Unfortunately, PR usually plays a fairly unsettled role within the hierarchy of its respective organisations. It is often viewed as a part of a broader marketing mix. The management considers reporting in the media nothing else but an extended billboard for advertising slogans. However, PR is not a merely an alternative strategy for cheap product-placement. It cannot and should not solely substitute unaffordable marketing activities.

PR acts successfully by evoking positive connotations in the public for a long-lasting period - like the smooth sound of whispering waves. In this respect, it helps to establish public acceptance which is vital for the economic success of STPs.

PR achieves this by offering information to the public for critical reflexion, because it is the public opinion that has to be convinced of the necessity of such a project. If you live off the taxpayer's

money, it is inevitable to explain to him what it is you are doing - in a reasonable and generally intelligible fashion. If successful, this also has a pleasant side-effect: generating enthusiasm among the broad public for the idea of cooperation between science and economy. This is particularly important, because future industries heavily rely on synergies resulting from this cooperation. Communicating this core message cannot be accomplished only by spending large amounts of money on advertising and marketing. It is necessary to reach a consensus among those who contribute as tax-payers to the success of a STP. Therefore, every article written by an independent journalist is more valuable than every advertisement.

For that reason, a close cooperation between those in charge of PR within the framework of the IASP organisation opens up new perspectives to enhance the value of PR. This can be done with relatively little pecuniary investment and few additional resources.

Scientific communities and high-tech-clusters rely on a constant exchange of information across boundaries. This specific form of exchanging information is not limited to communication among professionals. There is no doubt that most STP managements recognise and embark on a vivid exchange with the media. By doing this, every management (and PR is part of it) is confronted with a core problem: It acts in closed communication circuits, where experts mutually assure each other of their professionalism. We are in the habit of communicating in a specific jargon and fail to recognize that it is barely understandable to outsiders. The extensive use of jargons (whether intentionally or not) separates others from the communication process and manoeuvres the speaker himself into "linguistic isolation". Due to my personal experience, I would strongly propose to view jargons as mere linguistic traps and I think it is one of the foremost tasks of PR, to find ways to escape from these traps.

At this point I would like to raise the question to all in charge of PR within the IASP framework: How can we jointly find a way out of these traps?

### Thinking in Stories

At first, we should start to learn to "think in stories". Of course, we all want to spread "good news". But all too often, "good news" has to survive an exhausting process of internal reconciliation between conflicting interests of varying actors. In the course of this process, the „good news“ perishes, leaving journalists and their readers with lengthy and hard-to-digest manuscripts and press releases.

„Good news“ is also rarely newsworthy. Scientists and entrepreneurs prefer to communicate hard facts and figures, whereof journalists normally can't draw inspiration. What management believes is important, a journalist challenges with the simple question "So what?" In order to convince the media, a coherent response has to be found to this question. Journalists are neither allies nor are they enemies of PR. They are our customers. Accordingly, the question should be: what does the customer want?

First of all, he wants news that is actually newsworthy. Therefore, he will not be pleased by lengthy statements or papers that are overloaded with numbers and formulas. Also, he will naturally resent the idea of even well-written and perfectly edited stories that should be best quoted in full. We all know that external PR agencies increasingly specialise on "selling" narrative press releases full of "hidden" advertising.

It is much more persuasive to supply journalists with good ideas for stories because they will write them out with pleasure, which they obviously prefer to do themselves. It is essential to the journalist that he is supplied with news, he can weave into a story worthy of being published. Journalists must think of their customers as well. These are the readers. Among them are those, we always have to keep in mind: the decision makers.

The media are currently undergoing deep changes worldwide. Nobody exactly knows what this might lead to. Newspapers, magazines, television and radio broadcasting compete with an emerging number of new internet-based platforms of communication. We can assume, however, that we shall continue to rely on a constant inflow of information from reliable and reputable sources in future. Here, the form of editing of information will continue to play a major role. It is not sufficient to simply announce news; they also have to be presented in an adequate form. News must attract the

reader's attention. People do not get enthusiastic about facts and figures. We are all newspaper readers. It's the human touch that makes a good story and thus good news attractive. We prefer to read stories about people who have done something extraordinary. And we are not eager to complicate things. The world is complicated enough.

Science and technology parks are treasure troves of "hidden champions". We are all familiar with the various (and often mythical) stories about founders, about the financing of young enterprises, about new and innovative products - in short: the fascinating process of the realisation of an idea. Each of us is fully aware of the outstanding qualities of the STPs we work for. These are our unique selling propositions. Most technology parks accommodate a number of enterprises playing a leading role in the world market in their specific segment of technology. There are plenty of stories to tell. But the moment we take a closer look we will realise that many of them still remain untold. But isn't it our foremost task to make them visible?

### **How to establish a story-pool?**

Each STP should start to develop procedures for collecting ideas for interesting stories. We should assist each other in establishing, what I want to call, story-pools. These stories can then be offered to the national media. We should further consider how these can also be offered to the international media -by means of the IASP network. The aim is to raise public awareness, particularly at an international level, to our mutual benefit.

Establishing a story-pool means collecting ideas and stimuli for stories and not complete press releases written out in full. Think of it as a collection of short exposés, memos and references to entrepreneurs and scientists - trigger information that have the potential to encourage a journalist to write a story. This idea can be illustrated by using the example of Berlin Adlershof. This is one of Germany's most successful high-technology locations. Covering an area of 4.2 square kilometres (1,038 acres), it is embedded in an overall urban design concept. Some 15,000 people work there currently, and an added 7.000 students of Berlin's Humboldt University (HU).

Adlershof is home to nearly 870 small and medium-sized companies and 17 scientific institutions. At its heart, the science and technology park accommodates about 420 companies and eleven non-university research institutes concerned with photonics and optics, microsystems and materials, IT and media, Biotechnology and the environment as well as photovoltaic. Six science departments from Berlin's HumboldtUniversity are also based on the site (Chemistry, Geography, Computer Science, Mathematics, Physics and Psychology). Adding to this are some 140 media companies and more than 300 commercial businesses, shops, hotels and restaurants, a landscaped park and 380 private homes that were created nearby. It is almost certain that there is plenty of material for stories.

WISTA-MANAGEMENT GMBH is the operating company of the Adlershof science and technology park. Its PR department has access to all addresses and basic information of all tenants on the premises. This enables us to select a number of addresses that could potentially offer stories worth telling.

As a first step, we screened a vast number of tenants reducing the number of promising addresses from 884 to 240. Needless to say, not all of our tenants have stories to tell.

As a second step, from these 240 facilities, we identified approximately 120 of them as small and medium-sized enterprises that do not yet produce newsworthy news in the narrower sense. Despite this, of course these are small companies with strong prospects for the future. They could be potential storytellers, because of their extraordinary products, innovative financing drafts, and remarkable personalities.

The other half 240 addresses we have identified as already appealing to the media. These are small companies with presentable products that still depend on our PR support. For illustration, I would like to cite an example: It is the story of a retired professor who recently founded a biotech company. The idea came up while he was relaxing on the beaches of Sri Lanka. There, he couldn't help pondering an unsolved problem: How the side effect of highly potent medication is further reduced? Back in Germany, he soon found investors, founded a company and decided to settle down in our science park. The professor's story is interesting in more than one way: Meanwhile this "young" entrepreneur is 70 years old and the method he chose to solve his problem is just sensational! Inso-

far it was almost effortless for us to bring the attention of Germany's most important news magazine "Der Spiegel" to the professor's story. This made him a well-known man and his company highly attractive for investors.

Apart from stories like this, there are also a number of institutions among those 120 addresses in Adlershof that have already organised public relations on their own account. Solon SE, a manufacturer of solar cells, and the German Centre for Aeronautics and Space Technology (DLR) serve as an example. With facilities like these, we organise PR cooperation on an individual basis. This also applies to stock holding corporations, where PR is usually subject to restriction. Despite of this, it is essential to view these established institutions as an integral part of our PR work, because they substantially contribute to the image of our science park.

Our story pool is thus filled with ideas and stimuli from these 240 addresses. We know exactly what their specific abilities are and what individually distinguishes them from others. Additionally, our story-pool contains personal testimonials on all of these aspects, which are crucial to the process - as is their confidentiality. While the product of a company might be attractive to the media, the leading figure behind it might not be.

As a third and final step, we can then offer our ideas to the media. We take it for granted to do this by contacting journalists personally. The outcome of simply writing press releases and spreading them via a mailing list all over the country, hoping that some editor will pick it up incidentally, will not be sufficient. It is as effective as shooting in a dark forest with a shotgun. By maintaining these personal contacts, we have become closely acquainted with what journalists are interested in - and had to learn that this is not always in sync with our own intentions.

We can only recommend this procedure to other technology parks. For this reason, I would like to propose that we should think about how we can help each other to build up story-pools for other STPs. I would like to emphasise that we should try doing this without creating additional bureaucratic processes costly in terms of time and labour. To this end, the establishment of a network of personal contacts between the PR representatives of our member parks might suffice.

### **Establishing a PR Network within IASP**

Story-pools can enable us to establish a platform of joint communication on an international basis. Because of this, my proposal is that we should seek out to what extent it might be possible to establish a network of mutual PR support among the science parks within the IASP framework.

As sketched out above, science parks rely on public support. Many of them play a key role in the innovation strategies of their respective countries which guarantee them public awareness on a national level. On top of that, they would further benefit from recognition on an international scale and it is here especially that PR is confronted with the problem that the news they deliver, fails to attract this. This is where international cooperation should start.

For this reason, we should establish a network to improve our international media relations. The following procedure would be conceivable:

1. We should make a list of the PR officers among the IASP members who are interested in creating their own Story pool and who are interested in cooperation with other parks.
2. We should think about cooperation strategies i.e. modes of support. The first hurdle we would then have to clear is the strong belief within our own managements that all of the messages they produce are indeed worthy of being printed. We must convince our management that PR is not merely a cheap vehicle for advertising. It is simple to run an advertisement, as it is simple to order a taxi. But it is extremely difficult to "order" an article in a newspaper. Plus, even if this were as simple, it would not necessarily make the published information more relevant to the general public, the story more enthralling, indeed the news more newsworthy. Seeing as most science and technology parks rely on a positive and multifaceted coverage in the media, we can achieve much more by collecting ideas for stories instead of sending out bottled messages.

3. Before building up story-pools we should support each other in finding answers to following questions:
  - a. Which facilities in my STP produce newsworthy news?
  - b. How do I identify interesting entrepreneurs?
  - c. Are there unique selling propositions, I can offer?
  - d. What other topics can be found in my technology park, which may be of interest to the media?
  - e. What distinguishes “my” technology park from others?
  - f. What does “my” technology park in common with others?

In order to discuss these questions, we should work at creating an adequate forum. Since we are scattered all over the continents of this planet, we will rarely find an opportunity to meet all in one place. We should therefore consider whether it makes sense to establish regional platforms that give us the opportunity to talk personally.

Furthermore, we could use either existing internal communications platforms within the IASP’s framework or establish a password-protected forum for PR managers to communicate worldwide.

Most likely, we will recognise very quickly that our stories are similar. We can therefore combine stories from several countries or even continents. This combination alone would be very interesting for many journalists. Or we might reveal certain differences. These also could be very interesting for the media. As a result, this would open up many new and interesting perspectives for our media work.

### **Developing a cross-over PR Network**

Science and technology parks usually have good media contacts on a regional and national, rather than on an international level. For example: The Adlershof STP has well-established contacts with Germany’s leading papers and news magazines, such as “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” and “Der Spiegel”. But we do not have a well-established contact with the “Economist” in Great Britain. If a colleague of mine from a British science park has a good story to offer, I could try to bring it to “Der Spiegel” and he could try doing the same with my story in order to bring it to the “Economist”. This is essentially the strength of networking.

Building up a network of contacts to the media also requires a system of mutual trust. Contacts to individuals from the media are very personal and confidential. It is very easy to lose the confidence of a journalist, but incredibly difficult to regain it. Therefore, it may not happen that after an editorial address is been communicated to a colleague in another country the journalist there will be flooded with uncontrolled information.

Consequently, we must find ways to concert our efforts to communicate on an international level. Here, I would like to quote two other examples, how this could be organised:

1. A colleague from France addresses the idea of an interesting story about a company to me. This French company is very active in the German market. The French colleague is interested to offer the story to the magazine “Der Spiegel”. In this particular case, based on my long experience with the German media, I would balance the pros and cons of forwarding the idea to the German news magazine in question.
2. A science park in Korea has a promising entrepreneur’s story to offer. The story (i.e. the idea of the story) will be wired to the media in Europe via our PR network. This would automatically open up opportunities for the Korean STP to penetrate local markets here. In this respect, our network could, in a discreet manner, act as a promoting agent for SME companies to gain access to foreign markets.

This process requires some intuition. It does not work, if someone wants to solely carry advertising messages. With this intention, one cannot establish reliable relationships with the media. PR and media need each other. Only an open and critical dialogue between STP management, the public

and the media guarantees credible reporting. And only a credible emerging technology park is an interesting partner for business.

### **Conclusion**

This proposal does not guarantee automatic success. However, I consider it a serious attempt to considerably enhance our visibility on an international level. It would also open up interesting perspectives for our organisation by contributing to an increased exchange and cooperation among IASP members. Therefore, I would suggest establishing a pilot project to ascertain whether and how this proposal can be realised. If desired, the PR team of WISTA-MANAGEMENT GMBH from the Berlin Adlershof STP would get this started.

It would be misguided and a waste of intellectual resources to limit PR of STPs to releasing statements or merely acting as an agent of advertising and marketing. In fact, PR is a powerful strategic instrument to influence public opinion by simply carrying conviction. The establishment of story-pools and the exchange of story ideas across national borders would enable us to better attract the media's attention to what really counts: convincing our customers that science parks are by all means attractive places for future investment.