

TAKING THE NANOPULSE

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No more science experiments! Nanotechnology gets down to business. Big business.

BY SCOTT E. RICKERT

Nanobusiness is business. Period. First, last, always.

While that may seem like an obvious notion, a recent conversation with a colleague suggested the need to revisit the topic. The question my colleague asked was, “What nanotechnology books, magazines, websites and blogs do you read?” The answer: “Not many. And not often.” Why? The science press tends to be “lab logs” of science experiments. I respect the work of academics, but the era of endless exploration is over – at least as long as the economy stumbles. My focus is on putting nanotechnology to work in the real world – today. That’s where the future is, because that’s where the money is. Sound crass? I think it’s exactly what you’d want to hear from any mainstream company where you had interests – from software to hotels to furniture. And like it or not, that needs to be the measure of nanotechnology.

It’s like this. The last ten years in nanotechnology have been focused on discovery. Now is the time to engineer solutions. Real products. That job of research isn’t finished, of course. But the innovations of those ten years...or five or three... need to be put to the real-world market test. What can you do with them? Will they work in real factories? How much are people willing to pay for them? Is there a sustainable business model here?

The good news is, there are plenty of success stories out there. You’ll find nanotechnology already at work in thousands of products. The Project on Emerging Nanotechnology through the Pew Charitable Trusts lists over 800 nano-products. And that barely scratches the surface. Major companies like GE, Dow, Honda, 3M, Shell, Lockheed-Martin, Ferro have made nanotechnology mainstream – so mainstream that they may not bother to identify it as nanotechnology. To them, it’s simply a product that works better. Some of it is cutting edge – think solar panels and hydrogen fuel cells. But a lot of it simply solves everyday problems. Imagine a nanocoating for dinnerware to keep it from marring. Or nanocrystals in bandaids to help prevent infection. Or easy-clean computer displays. Sound mundane? On the contrary, they’re smart, saleable business opportunities. And I think there are a tremendous number of usable, potentially profitable technologies in the pipeline. My focus is on getting them to market.

That takes us back to the original question: what do I read? Probably many of the same things you do – that any business leader does. The Wall Street Journal and Forbes. Fox Business News and Yahoo

Finance. And, of course, IndustryWeek. I track MarketWatch for what's happening in the world's capital markets. These are the places where I can find out about the markets I serve – or, more important, the markets I want to serve in the future.

What if you're on the other side of the equation? What if you're looking for nanotechnology to improve your company's products? Are nano-news resources the solution? Maybe. The NanoBusiness Alliance is the resource I trust most. Tim Harper of Cientifica takes an appealingly rational look at nano in his TNTlog. There's also *Small Times Magazine* and a nano-blog from Lux Research. Add to that a score of nano-news websites that are worth skimming – you just have to sift through the “lab reports” to find the useful business intelligence.

Truth be told, secondary sources may not be your best bet. If you're looking for solutions you can use now, you're better off with primary sources. Talk to a commercially successful nanotechnology company – either a purveyor or buyer. There you'll get real “news you can use.” And I've found that people on both sides of that equation are willing to honestly point you in the right direction if they can't be of help directly.

And what should you researchers be perusing? Well, if you're reading this, you already know. Don't get caught up in your brand of press. Stick to business. That's the only way science projects become solutions.

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