

Needed: more public understanding of science

It was three years ago when we called attention on this page to the beginnings of AIP's series of news features about science. The brief tapes are provided free to commercial tv news programs as a means of fostering public awareness of science. This series has proved enormously successful. During the three years of its existence, the program has generated 35 taped news spots and has developed a dedicated following of 75 tv stations and 4 cable systems that regularly air the material. The topics have included physics in medicine, microworlds, science in sports, environment, energy, astronomy and forensic science. Over this period the videotape spots have been seen by tens of millions of viewers.

At the same time the AIP program has been moving ahead, other science coverage on the commercial stations has dwindled until, at this point, the AIP spots are a significant part of the science coverage that remains on commercial tv. Science coverage is still strong on public tv with programs such as NOVA. But the audience for public tv (typically only 5–10 million even for the NOVA prime-time show) is five times smaller than the viewing audience for prime-time commercial tv. And most of the larger commercial audience rarely tunes in public tv programming.

So it is particularly unfortunate that AIP was forced to reduce the tv news spot program in this past year by a factor of three. With the NSF startup funding of about \$150 000 per year for two years, the program was able to turn out 15 spots per year. AIP was unable to replace the NSF funding for the third year. The only available source of funds proved to be from AIP member societies who were able to provide enough (about \$50 000) for a bare-bones effort of five spots per year—the minimum number that can maintain the interest of the tv stations.

The AIP tv program has proved itself by far the most effective means we have to foster understanding of science among mass audiences. But tv production is expensive! Clearly, larger sources of funding are needed to enable this highly successful program to fulfill in any substantial way its highly important mission.

Likely nongovernment sources for funds of the magnitude needed are contributions from industry, foundations and individuals.

We particularly alert readers who have connections in the industrial sector to use whatever influence they may have to obtain industrial funding for what has proven to be an effective approach to making the public aware of science.

Harold L. Davis