

Industry Sponsored Research: Communication, What When & How

Good communication is important for every kind of relationship, including that of researchers and their funding sponsors. The following guidelines are suggestions from industry personnel that will keep industry sponsors coming back for more.

When To Communicate

A key to keeping industry sponsors happy is to communicate "just often enough." How often is that? It depends. If you already have a close working relationship with a technical counterpart in the industry, informal weekly or bi-weekly communications (e.g. e-mail or a phone call) may be appropriate. For most interactions, however, monthly informal updates are suggested.

The research agreement signed between ISU and the industry sponsor usually indicates a series of required communications. Generally, these are a yearly written report and, for some contracts, intermediate reports. The most consistent message from industry is never miss deadlines for required reports, and don't make industry remind you that they are due. In addition, the ISU Research Foundation (ISURF) is required to communicate with the industry sponsor if an invention disclosure is filed on the research.

Most contracts require a 30- to 60-day review period for publications. In reality, this is often difficult to accommodate. If you have a good working relationship with your industry contact and inform them of upcoming presentations and publications, you might be able to work out an arrangement that lets you include "last minute" data.

What To Communicate

Communicating the right information is another key to keeping your industry sponsor happy. A general rule is to communicate more information about the results and interpretations and less information about the process. Remember that industry is results-oriented. For example, because the materials and methods were included in the proposal, they only need to be summarized briefly when submitting a report. Literature reviews that justify the line of research should also be avoided. Get straight to the point— what is the outcome, and how can it impact the industry?

How To Communicate

In a final report or a journal submission, never surprise your industry contact with the results. Always informally communicate results first! This is especially important if the results of the research are different from the predictions and/or expectations. Depending on the research, these results could have a direct impact on the industry and an early informal communication will give both sides the appropriate time to review the information and determine the best way to proceed.

A good practice to follow is to call your contact when you get important results and follow this up with an e-mail or formal report as required. When composing the final report, include a one page or less executive summary on a separate page that your industry contact can forward to appropriate people in the company. In general, reports should be 3 to 5 pages and again, results should be the focus. In your interpretations and analysis, it is also helpful to include information on the impact that this research could have on the company.

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