

Biotech company hopes to go 'viral' (The News Journal)

Newark's Analtech creates video to appeal to younger generation

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Analtech Inc. would like to be known among the younger crowd for more than just its often mispronounced name.

The maker of laboratory equipment has been known to attract college students who pose for pictures in front of the company's Newark facility, and founder Matt Lamkin reports occasionally receiving "specimens" in the company mailbox.

Ken Grant, the company's sales and marketing director, has a well-rehearsed line for those who chuckle at the name.

"We don't mind being the butt of the joke," he said, "as long as we get the job done."

Analtech -- pronounced with a short "a," as in analytical technologies -- hopes its latest marketing move will have people laughing with the company, rather than at it.

On June 21, the company orchestrated a marathon film shoot at Mount Cuba Center in Greenville for an online video it plans to release in August.

Analtech hopes the video, a spoof of "Monty Python and the Holy Grail," will go "viral" and make its way to blogs, Web sites and e-mail inboxes around the world. It's part of Analtech's effort to make sure the next generation of lab technicians knows about a technology called thin-layer chromatography -- and turns to Analtech, rather than its competitors, for supplies.

The Newark firm, founded in 1961, is the sole U.S. producer of thin-layer chromatography plates and accessories. The technology is used by drug companies, university researchers, crime labs and others to separate mixtures into their individual components.

Thin-layer chromatography is a cheaper, lower-tech method than gas or liquid chromatography, which require expensive diagnostic devices. Analtech, with 20 employees, competes against German chemicals giant Merck KGaA, Macherey-Nagel of Germany and Whatman, a British firm acquired earlier this year by General Electric Co. business unit GE Healthcare.

Analtech's sales in fiscal 2007 were up 10 percent to \$2.4 million, a jump that general manager Steven Miles attributed to aggressive marketing and the weak dollar, which drove sales overseas.

But Miles said Analtech probably has less than half of the U.S. market, which accounts for most of its sales. Although he said precise market share data was unavailable, Miles estimated that Merck has 50 percent of the U.S. market, Analtech has 30 percent, and Macherey-Nagel and Whatman share the remaining 20 percent.

If Analtech wants to grab domestic market share from its competitors, Miles said, the company needs to reach out to high school and college students, teach them about chromatography and hope they remember Analtech's name when they arrive in a professional lab.

"The only way to grow our product is to get young people on board," he said.

Enter Chris Stout and the Delaware Film Company.

The Delaware native and graduate of the University of Southern California's film school got on board with the project last fall after bouncing ideas around with Grant.

The two were talking about how Analtech's CycloGraph device, a testing instrument that operates using centrifugal force, worked like magic. That sparked a discussion about the conflict between science and magic, which led to the Middle Ages and finally, to the cult classic 1975 Monty Python film.

Stout's script features heroine Ana L'Tech using the CycloGraph to prove to an angry mob that she is not a witch, and that the corrupt Sheriff Merck has been impersonating the king. The script is loaded with ironic, winking references to the video's role as advertising, as well as a number of nods to the Monty Python film.

As Stout said, the online video's target audience is lab technicians, many of whom likely know the British comedy troupe's film by heart.

"One of the rules of a viral video is, it has to be entertaining in its own right," Stout said.

The film shoot, done on the longest day of the year, was a sunup-to-sundown affair featuring 44 performers -- only two of whom were professionals -- in costumes provided by Opera Delaware. Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., and State Auditor Tom Wagner were among those who showed up for guest appearances.

Castle said Grant was "particularly persistent" in trying to cast the congressman in the video. Castle was part of an angry mob, and even had a speaking part -- "about five words," he said.

"I've had several offers," Castle joked a few days after the film shoot.

Stout and his crew shot all seven-plus pages of the script in a single day, which he said was about half of what a Hollywood film would shoot in one day. Grant said the company did what could have been a \$120,000 film shoot for less than half that amount.

"I think we broke laws of physics," Grant said.

The Delaware Film Company will now edit the footage into a polished 6-minute video, with a launch aimed for August. Then Analtech and the film company will send a flood of e-mails and post the video on sites such as YouTube.com in an effort to make it go viral.

Viral videos began as an organic phenomenon: The funniest or oddest videos would get the most clicks on YouTube and show up on blogs and in e-mail inboxes around the world.

They can often be unintentionally funny, like the bumbling answer from Miss Teen South Carolina during last year's Miss Teen USA pageant. An infamous viral video is the "Star Wars kid," a short clip of a Canadian teenager clumsily brandishing a golf ball retriever like a lightsaber. The clip has been viewed online hundreds of millions of times and spawned countless spoofs.

As the viral video phenomenon grew, marketers and corporations inevitably turned to online videos as a promotional tool,

with mixed results.

Analtech is not the first biotech company to produce its own online video. Bio-Rad Laboratories, a maker of life science research and diagnostic products, put out "The PCR Song," a "We Are the World"-type sing-along touting the benefits of polymerase chain reaction, a technique used to amplify DNA for lab analysis. The video, first posted in January, had more than 8,100 pageviews earlier this week on YouTube.

Bio-Rad competitor Applied Biosystems offered its own online video, "Dancing Scientist," featuring a nebbish-looking scientist dancing to a catchy song.

Analtech, a much smaller company than Bio-Rad or Applied Biosystems, nonetheless aimed for a more ambitious online video. Brian Sowards, head of marketing for the Delaware Film Company, said the company strives for Hollywood production values, including employing an experienced film crew and shooting on a \$17,500 Red digital camera.

"It's a product far beyond that which your average marketing firm can deliver," Sowards said. "In the case of a viral video, the payoff is that a small company can create partnerships and clients around the world for less than \$100,000."

The video should help Analtech in its educational mission, too. Dave Jones, president of Pencader Charter High School in New Castle, said the video would be used as a teaching tool at his business- and finance-oriented school, where Analtech's Miles spoke to honors science students earlier this year.

Jones said students may not know what chromatography is, but they all know the television show "CSI," which featured some of Analtech's equipment in a recent episode.

"Any time you can bring the coolness factor into a science lab," Jones said, "the kid's going to be into it."

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