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A word of wisdom for stubborn DuPont: Benlate

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When a popular product is driven from the marketplace by bad publicity, you'd think the company that took the hit would apply the lesson to future controversies.

At the DuPont Co., though, learning from past mistakes - the process at the heart of the scientific method - apparently doesn't register as one of The Miracles of Science.

The past mistake involved Benlate, a fungicide that enjoyed a good reputation among the many farmers and plant growers who used it. After a reconstituted version allegedly killed the plants it was supposed to protect, DuPont fought in court for years trying to prove scientifically that Benlate didn't cause the crop damage.

Whether the company was right was beside the point. The cost of defending Benlate in court became so high that DuPont discontinued its manufacture.

The debacle reinforced a lesson marketers learned in the Tylenol-tainting scare: To best control damage to a brand's reputation, a company must go overboard to show it considers public safety paramount. That's what Johnson & Johnson did, and Tylenol remains a valuable brand to this day.

Certainly, DuPont knows the value of being a good corporate citizen. The company has spent several years promoting something called "sustainable growth," which, among other things, means minimizing its effect on the environment.

It sounds nice, but it won't mean a thing if DuPont doesn't cope more shrewdly with the controversy erupting over its manufacture, use and disposal of a chemical called ammonium perfluorooctanoate. Known as PFOA to scientists and as C-8 within the DuPont Co., the substance is a key chemical in the manufacture of Teflon, but is not present in the finished product.

Originally manufactured by the 3M Co., C-8 has been in use for more than 50 years. It has not been regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency.

That may be about to change, as the EPA has been studying the substance in anticipation of setting regulatory levels for human exposure. **One reason is that C-8 persists in the environment for a long time; blood samples from around the country have found it in measurable quantities in more than 80 percent of the population. Some 3M tests showed toxicity in rats; DuPont dismisses those tests as not applicable to humans.**

The potential problems are troubling enough that 3M began to phase out C-8 in 2000 and stopped selling it last year, citing its commitment to "responsible environmental management."

DuPont apparently is too dependent on C-8 for Teflon manufacture to phase it out quickly, so its Web site explains, "There is no evidence or data that demonstrates PFOA causes adverse human health effects" at low levels of exposure.

The EPA says the same thing in a much different way: "There remains considerable scientific uncertainty regarding potential risks."

Before rushing to defend C-8's safety, DuPont poobahs should ask themselves: Which statement makes a better sound bite? Which message will resonate better with a scientifically illiterate public? Is winning its point with the EPA worth the threat of environmentalists conducting years of Teflon boycotts?

If those questions are too tough, here's an easier one: Can you tell me where I can buy a bag of Benlate?

Al Mascitti's opinion column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. Reach Al at 324-2866 or amascitti@delawareonline.com. For previous columns, or to comment on today's column, go to www.delawareonline.com.