

Making Use of "Outside" Research and Analysis

FRANCIS B. COON, WARF Institute, Inc., P.O. Box 2599 Madison, Wisconsin 53701

ABSTRACT AND SUMMARY

The services offered by commercial research and analysis laboratories are discussed with emphasis on what a user may expect. Suggestions are given on what to look for in an "outside" laboratory, and what should be done in cases of dissatisfaction or uncertainty. Problems a service laboratory may have with users and ways to resolve such problems are given. Typical examples illustrate the usefulness of "outside" research and analysis.

What constitutes an "outside" research and testing laboratory? Basically, it is a laboratory to which some one turns outside of his own organization for services for which he expects to pay a fee. There are few laboratories anywhere that are so self-contained that they do not need additional services on some occasion.

It is likely that everyone at one time or another will find need for such services. Even the housewife on her trips to the market pays for indirect services which are performed for her by unknown laboratories. These services include food labeling, quality and safety testing, and a host of others.

Why does anyone use an "outside" lab? The obvious answer is that you can obtain analyses or services that your own laboratory cannot do. It may also be in an area where you can see no advantage in trying to set up programs in your own lab. In many instances you may find that you are able to obtain faster service than is possible inhouse. An "outside" lab may routinely do all those analyses that do not fit into your quality control program but that are necessary to the success of it.

Price may be a tremendous factor. Have you ever conducted a cost analysis of your own laboratory? Suppose you determine that the costs are comparable or even slightly against you. You still may decide that the value of direct control and establishing your own priorities are pluses that make you want to maintain your laboratory. What about all those tests that you need and do run which are not routine? Perhaps they are routine in some "outside" lab. Your gain could be better service, better answers or both at a lower cost to you.

You may use an "outside" laboratory because you expect that the analyses will be accepted without bias by those to whom you intend to present them, be they users of your product, the readers of a journal, or a governmental agency.

How do you go about picking your "outside" laboratory? First, find out whether it is knowledgeable in the area of your concern. Do not hesitate to ask what experience the lab has had in that area. Also, ask about knowledge and experience in related areas. If possible, obtain some outside opinions. Attempt to find out what you will get for the price offered. Is it simply a number that leaves you to your own devices to decide its meaning? Why do "outside" labs have different charges for like services? Ask these questions of the labs you are contemplating. Choose the one with the answers that best suit your needs. Be sure you understand what you will get.

You may not want to go to such lengths if only a simple test is required. However, why shouldn't you want to learn something about this lab? It could be that you will find that it can be of much greater help to you than you had

initially contemplated. Or you might learn that it is the wrong place to send your particular work.

What should a direct user expect from an "outside" laboratory? You, the user, belong to an industry, an association, the government, a school or any other unit. All users should feel that they will be treated the same whether the services they seek are large or small. To make such a proposition work, both sides should furnish whatever information is necessary to get the job done quickly and properly. The "outside" lab will be glad to give you advice as to how to take or prepare the sample or project, how to ship, when to ship, and what you might expect to receive. They will give you a firm quotation when possible. They will explain the chances for success or failure on ventures of questionable stature and the costs that could ensue.

You should be prepared to tell all that you know about your sample or project. When you ship, include a letter detailing this information. Include such items as label claims, the units desired in reporting, and an exact description of the sample or project. Anything omitted may merely mean a report that does not answer all of your questions. Some of you may be thinking at this point, "If I give them all that information, am I not likely to get a biased answer?" If you have done your homework in picking your outside Lab, you will know that it is not very likely.

Some time after you ship, you should receive acknowledgment from the "outside" lab stating that the sample or project has been received. They will indicate their understanding of the request and give you an estimate of the time to complete the work required.

Following completion of the work you should receive a report which clearly states the results obtained, the method used, and whatever information is necessary to identify the sample for future purposes. Either with the report or shortly thereafter you should expect to receive the charges for services rendered.

You should expect the "outside" lab to stand behind its results in a court of law, settling a dispute with another lab or reported results. They should also be very willing to work with you to interpret their results, so that you may have complete understanding of them. More and more of you are insisting that the "outside" lab interpret the results or data reported. This is fine. You should feel that interpretation is an integral part of a lab's responsibilities. One has only to look at the long chain of events required to obtain registration of a new drug or pesticide to know that proper interpretation of each link in the chain is vital. Your chain may not be as long but it is no less vital to you.

You should expect complete confidentiality from the "outside" lab. Your reports, analyses, or name will not be used or given to anyone without your permission. Undoubtedly, you do expect this, but do you take complete advantage of it? Many "outside" labs have rapport with government agencies and industrial groups. Information can be obtained for you without ever revealing to whom the information will be given. It may even be possible to get tentative approval of protocols and testing parameters before any work is started. After the work is started the "outside" lab will keep open its channels of communication to ensure that everything required is done.

An extreme use of confidentiality has appeared recently. You hire a law firm to represent you and to submit the samples or project to the "outside" lab. In this way your

name never appears on reports and correspondence. The reasons behind such tactics could be to make sure that competitors never learn your new areas of interest or, in this age of consumer interest in environmental problems, that your name is never associated with one of the "bad" guys.

There are a number of problems that can and do arise with the use of an "outside" lab. The first and foremost problem is that you just do not believe the results you received. Should you simply write back and say that due to the fact that the results are wrong or were not what you wanted, you won't pay your bill? Sometimes clients don't do anything: write, pay the bill, or ask for an explanation.

Most problems arise because of misunderstanding and lack of communication. When you submit a sample or project, describe it in sufficient detail to insure no confusion about what is required. Never assume that what you have done in the past will define your wishes in the future. Communicate!

One of the most vexing problems for the outside lab is with the client who pays his bill but is never heard from again. If you are dissatisfied, you should let the lab know at once. One of the most difficult times an employee of an "outside" lab can face is at a meeting where he is accosted by a client for producing all those wrong answers. There is no way the employee can adequately respond to such an accusation.

If you question any result you receive from an "outside" lab, ask yourself the following questions. Did I describe the sample or project properly? Did I make it very clear what I required? Did I state the units I wanted used? Could any-

thing have been misinterpreted? Even if you are satisfied with all of the answers, don't assume that you need not take the next most important step. Call or write the laboratory. Let them know of your concern. You may be surprised to learn how quickly the problem can be resolved. The "outside" lab wants you to be satisfied with the work you had done by them. To accomplish this the "outside" lab may completely redo the work or send it to another "outside" lab with your concurrence. Of course, if you are wrong you will have to pay the additional cost, just as will the "outside" lab, in case it is wrong.

Finally, you should expect that the "outside" lab you use is not always perfect, does not always give you the answers you expected, and does not always get the work done a week before they said they would have.

Three recent events may change much of what I have just said. First was the disclosure that a major pharmaceutical firm may have tampered with the toxicological results submitted for registration of a new material. This was followed by the disclosure that "outside" laboratories may have been negligent in recording and reporting work performed for the pharmaceutical firm. Finally, the February 25, 1976, Volume 41, No. 38 of the Federal Register reported rules and regulations under Title 15, Subtitle A, Part 7 outlining "Procedures for a National Voluntary Laboratory Accreditation Program."

A discussion of the impact that any of these could have on an "outside" lab must be delayed to a more appropriate time.

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