

Open Biosystems article below

Brian Pollock, CEO of Open Biosystems, sees his business as a mercantile of sorts, providing tools to help researchers extract the information they need to complete their research

In the 1800s, prospectors went into the hills with picks and shovels to dig until they discovered their fortune in gold. In today's brave new world of high-tech biotechnology, researchers wade through the Information Superhighway, trying to decipher millions of bits and bytes of information to find the components they need to make medical and scientific discoveries.

Brian Pollock, CEO of Open Biosystems, sees his business as a mercantile of sorts, providing tools to help researchers extract the information they need to complete their research.

Pollock was born and raised Huntsville in the technological atmosphere that has become the city's trademark. Since the 1960s, when scientists and engineers flooded the city to work with Werner von Braun on the space program, Huntsville has been known as a gathering place for entrepreneurs and visionaries. "My father worked at NASA so I was always surrounded by science," he says. This environment provided a fertile background for his future calling. After obtaining his degree in computer science from Athens State College, he went to work for Jim Hudson at Research Genetics, writing software to help synthesize DNA. Pollock

Helping Researchers Strike Gold


BY DANA COWART CRISSON



speaks highly of Hudson, giving him credit for nurturing his ideas and encouraging him to think outside the box. "I had an incredible experience at Research Genetics. It was a very entrepreneurial atmos-

phere in which to work. Jim would entertain any idea — he was very supportive."

Pollock stayed at Research Genetics (now part of Invitrogen) for over 10 years, until he teamed



A typical 96-well plate contains one gene per well. Open Biosystems stores and sells over 12 million genes from dozens of species.

up with Troy Moore and founded Open Biosystems, appropriately enough on Independence Day, 2001. Although he was reluctant to leave, he knew it was time to pursue his own business interests. “I am

passionate about biological research, or bio-informatics, which is the computer science applied to biology. So, we structured our company so it would function like a Library of Congress for genes,” he explains.

“To put it another way, we are the Amazon.com to understand the function of genes. If you are trying to find a book, you put the book title into Amazon or Google, and you get the information. With our company, you put the name of the gene in, and receive the information. We are very user friendly.”

According to Pollock, when a researcher makes a discovery, the information must be published and validated by the appropriate research committees. Then the researcher is faced with the daunting task of informing the research community about his work. That is where Open Biosystems comes in — they specialize in getting the word out, in helping to bring the researchers and the appropriate data together.

“We are an open source community for software development. Not open as in *free*, but as in open and easy access to information and scientific discoveries,” he says. “We sell the tools to help researchers study genes, and we specialize in tools to study every gene in an organism. We read their research work, check all the right protocols, ensure that the work is marketable to the research community, and then we put the information out there. With our help, the pace at which discov-

Helping Researchers Strike Gold

eries are made is greatly increased.”

On any given day, the company may work with prestigious customers including Ely Lilly and Company, Stanford University, National Institute of Health, Harvard Medical School, Wyeth, John Hopkins University and the Scripps Institute. “We have been working with researchers at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute to help study that disease. When one of their researchers develops new tools and publishes his work, we help him get the information out to other researchers,” he says. “We are a self-feeding machine. Our revenue stream comes from the researchers listing Open Biosystems in the published reports of their new discoveries. That is a great marketing tool.” Since the company was founded, sales have doubled each year.

Open Biosystems currently has more than 50 employees and in excess of a dozen distributors around the world. The firm is located in Cummings Park along with two other leading-edge businesses: Applied Genomics, a company that uses genomic differences in breast cancer and other diseases to develop treatments based on a patient’s genetic makeup, and Source CE, a



Open Biosystems CEO Brian Pollock: Biotechnology has a large role to play in our state, and we want to expand that role in any way that we can.”

“I couldn’t be prouder to have a lab in Birmingham, located on Alabama’s preeminent medial research campus [UAB]. It is an honor to be able to interact with researchers in both cities.”

company which serves the cystic fibrosis community with products to reduce the impact of the disease and enhance quality of life.

“Open Biosystems does a lot of work with the University of Alabama in Huntsville. The faculty at UAH gives tirelessly of their time and efforts to make PBR (Partnership for Biotechnology) successful,” Pollock says. “Our company also has a lab in Birmingham adjacent to the University of Alabama at Birmingham campus, where a team of researchers is focused on one of our leading

research technologies. I couldn’t be prouder to have a lab in Birmingham, located on Alabama’s preeminent medial research campus. It is an honor to be able to interact with researchers in both cities.”

Pollock is also excited about the Hudson-Alpha Institute for Biotechnology (HAIB), a world-class research facility that is actively recruiting scientists to Huntsville for genomic and other projects.

“My wife, Kelli, works for HAIB,” he says with a smile. “We talk shop all the time!” According to Laura Huckabee-Jennings, marketing director for Open Biosystems, the state of Alabama contributed \$50 million in support of HAIB toward the construction of its main building, a 230,000 square-foot facility that broke ground in early 2006.

Open Biosystems, other biotechnical and pharmaceutical companies, and the HAIB and other universities have joined together to form The Partnership for Biotechnology Research, an active industry group that brings together

academia, industry, and other individuals to learn about biotechnology. Pollock is very involved with the organization, which is committed to supporting local scientific work.

He says PBR has two main functions: “First, we have bi-monthly meetings where we bring in speakers who can communicate their research to everyone, offering a broad grasp of the concepts of biotechnology to all attendees; and second, we offer networking and social opportunities that are very valuable in any field. We are meeting today, for example, and our speaker is Guy Caldwell from the

University of Alabama, who is bringing 40 of his students to tour our facility. Following the meeting we are hosting a barbecue at the Huntsville Botanical Gardens. We have met some fantastic people through these events, especially students, and many come back to work for us when they graduate. Approximately 25 percent of our

“Governor Bob Riley has made massive commitments to biotechnology, and our strong state leaders are continually working to bring scientists and other leaders in our field to our state.”

Michelle Gudgen removes plates from a minus-80-degree freezer for replication and shipping.



employees were hired as a result of the biotechnology events we have held here.”

When asked about his hometown, Pollock replies, “Huntsville is an exciting place to be. There is a can-do attitude here in Huntsville that is unmatched anywhere else. The state of Alabama has been very supportive as well. Governor Bob Riley has made massive commitments to biotechnology, and our strong state leaders are continually working to bring scientists and other leaders in our field to our state.”

The mission statement for Open Biosystems is clear, says Pollock: to provide life science researchers the broadest access to tools, support, and services to aid in understanding the processes of life and to improve the quality of living. “We are dedicated to getting out new technologies, so every day I work with as many different teams as possible in order to I can advance these technologies. Biotechnology has a large role to play in our state, and we want to expand that role in any way that we can.” ■