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All the Facts on Cellular Phones, Please

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MOTOROLA, the world's largest maker of cellular phones, called a news conference last week to deny rumors that cellular phones pose a cancer risk. Motorola gets an A for crisis management and a C for integrity.

Its top managers did many things correctly. They acknowledged the rumor swiftly. They called the news conference and went on television. They used science to back up their statements.

These executives appear to have done their homework. Unfortunately for the cellular industry, it was not a totally successful performance. Wall Street did not buy it, and consumers are confused.

The problem began with an evasion. Edward F. Statano, president of the Motorola division that makes cellular phones, said the phones' safety is "rooted in scientific fact," and he cited "thousands of studies." But scientists concur that research to date is incomplete and inconclusive. Minimal re-

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search involving humans has been conducted — just tests on rats and human cells in petri dishes. There are nearly no experiments on the nonthermal biological effects in the cellular frequency. Little research has been done independently outside the telecommunications field.

Motorola's defense amounted to a tactical error that risked the company's credibility. It was an overstatement, implying that all the evidence was in. Just trust us, Motorola seemed to say.

Perhaps the public will do just that. Motorola has a reputation for world-class quality. People want to hear that their dandy car phones pose no greater danger than a possible increased risk of a traffic accident, and most people don't distinguish good science from bad. Future tests may even bear out company assertions of safety.

McCaw Cellular Communications, the largest cellular phone service company, seemed to be banking on the same assertions made by Motorola. "The body of scientific evidence is on our side," a McCaw spokesman said.

But as the public anxiety grew last week, the industry hesitated. Leaders in the field called for extensive research efforts to close the yawning information gap. The Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association said it would spend at least \$1 million on new research. McCaw said it would conduct additional studies of its own.

It may be too late. The public may react to what was missing at the press conference. Yes, cellular phones are valuable to society. No, scientific tests conducted so far raise no red flags about tumors.

But Motorola and the rest of the industry should have pushed on. What they could have said was something along these lines: "There is a great deal more to learn about using high-frequency devices so close to the brain. We would never sell those devices to you unless we thought they were safe. If you're worried, we'll give you a refund. As the research comes in, we'll report back. We care, and we promise to tell you the truth."

INDUSTRY lawyers will object to such assurances and will miss the point. If these companies want to win and keep public support, they must demonstrate their deep concern for consumers. They have to show that health and safety are their top priorities — way before profits and growth — and they have to mean it.

Motorola has earned a reputation for quality products and enjoys progressive management. It's beaten back the Japanese at their own game, and that's good these days. Now Motorola is showing a talent for crisis management. That is impressive — assuming its position is supported by future scientific studies. We give the company high marks for effort, but it's got a lot to learn. ■