

More Than Just a Fashion Statement: Sunovion helps bring research to the runway with Descience

Research scientists and runway models don't always mix in the same circles. But "Descience" was designed to do just that, merging two seemingly dichotomous worlds—science and fashion—with striking results. The Descience Fashion Show, staged at the MIT Media Lab on September 29th, was the culmination of a year-long competition between pairs of scientists and fashion designers. As a corporate sponsor of Descience, Sunovion had a VIP seat at the show and valuable opportunities to interact with innovators from around the world. "The event had all of the elements of a glamorous fashion show," as Anne Sullivan, VP of Corporate Development, described it, "—models, bright lights, the runway—but was elevated by a sense of scientific purpose."



Indeed, the science that inspired each look was front and center. Apparel inspired by cutting-edge research depicted diseases, disorders and scientific advances in vivid detail. Jaimin Mahadevia, Director of New Products Planning, was struck by the power of the imagery. "Sometimes as makers and marketers of therapies, you get overly clinical and can lose sight of the human element," he commented. "Seeing

these fashions made me think of how visualizing a disease would help us all bring the human element front and center."

How did Sunovion get involved in Descience? Back in September 2013, members of the Corporate Development team joined MIT's Industrial Liaison Program (ILP), an initiative designed to spur creative idea-sharing between the corporate and academic worlds. The team chose the Descience Project, brainchild of MIT student Dr. Yuly Fuentes-Medel, as its ILP project and Sunovion was pleased to sponsor such a prominent endeavor.

The entire process took roughly a year. In January 2014, designers from across the U.S. applied for a spot to participate. Scientists from around the world and from a range of fields—including neuroscience, molecular biology and biomedical engineering—were tapped for the project and took part in their own match-making. About 60 designer-scientist teams were formed, 45 of whom were selected to make dresses. Fast-forward to September 2014, where 15 finalists took to the catwalk for the final competition.

Although the garments and the cutting-edge research that inspired them took center stage, the creative challenge behind them was the main takeaway. By providing science with a new language, it made participants think about other possibilities outside their normal spheres of study. "Descience is all about thinking outside the box and challenging new ways of looking at things," said Amy Schacterle, VP Regulatory Affairs. "It's really a perfect example of how innovation can be ignited through interdisciplinary collaboration."

PHOTO CAPTIONS

Out-of-Body Experience

This collaboration between a Boston designer and a bioengineer who studies a rare disease called cerebral cavernous malformation won the People's Choice prize. The delicate red netted garment represents vascular networks that hold cells in the human body, while the 3-D printed bra and headdress represent the links between cells.



First-Place Winner

Cytoculture, a team consisting of Boston-based designer Carlos Villamil and MIT Biomaterial Engineer Dr. Laura Indolfi, created a “Zero Waste Unisex Multifunction Clothing System.” This highly adaptable clothing system was inspired by Dr. Indolfi’s endothelial cells research, which focused on how endothelial cells behave differently according to the structure they grow in and cling to.

Photonic T Bone [photo:“Pink Model.jpg”]

Research on bone tissue engineering inspired this dramatic look, which features a printed corset to illustrate the integration of a biocompatible plastic scaffold in the skin—a key element used by the scientist, together with isolated bone cells, to get neo-bone generation, monitored by multiphoton microscopy (represented here by LED lights). The hat and mask symbolize how isolated bone cells grow on a plastic scaffold to generate new bone.

People’s Choice Winner [photo: “Peoples Choice Scientist Designer.jpg”]

Boston designer Candice Wu with bioengineer Chris Gibson, founder of the Salt Lake City pharmaceutical company. Gibson explained the inspiration behind the final product: “The science that inspired this dress melds experimental and computational biology to identify drugs that could be repurposed to treat genetic diseases. The design is inspired by the power and independence sparked within rare diseases patients by new technologies and treatments.”