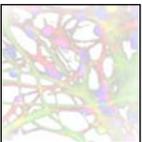


BBSRC Guide to Presenting science at public exhibitions





The Brain Stem Cell image used throughout the booklet is courtesy of Yirui Sun, ISCR.

Almost everyone who gets involved in communicating science at public exhibitions finds it a rewarding and enjoyable experience.

This booklet is designed to help you present the research in an effective, stimulating and engaging way so that both you and the visitors can get the most from the experience.

Preparing for the public

How to approach the science

It's always good to spend some time thinking about how you are going to speak about your work before you come face to face with visitors on your stand.

What is the **'hook'**? In other words, what makes your research interesting to other people? Most people are interested in things that affect them directly or give them a sense of how they fit into the world. It's a good idea to start with the purpose and practical applications and implications of the results of your work NOT with how you carried it out or what your area of research is called. For example, if you work on the mathematical modelling of epidemics, start by telling people how your work is aimed at stopping diseases like 'flu from spreading.

People are often also interested in whether the UK is a world leader in the research and where the research takes place.

Spend some time thinking about your **key messages**. Often visitors will see tens of stands at an exhibition and will not remember everything they see and hear. Think hard about a few simple messages you'd like them to remember when they get home.

Some digestible **facts and figures** can be helpful. While most people are not interested in knowing the detailed methodology, they do like to understand the basics, so use a simple jargon free explanation of how your findings came about, alongside some facts and figures.

You can never prepare for all the questions that you'll be asked but it is worth thinking if your research raises any **tricky questions**. Does your work have ethical implications? Might some people be morally opposed to it? Even the most benign research can be questioned: "What is the value of this research – is it about describing a problem we can't solve?" or, "Why isn't this money being spent on cancer research?"



Make sure you have something on the stand that people can interact with – even if it's just some plants, replicas or pieces of experimental kit. If it is safe, allow and indeed encourage visitors to handle exhibits or conduct experiments, children in particular will relish the change to 'have a go'. If family groups are expected, try to have something of interest for the children.



Safety issues

Make sure you know what to do if someone is taken ill on your stand or the fire alarm rings.

Behave appropriately with children. For example, do not touch children, photograph them or be alone with them on the stand without appropriate safeguards and permissions.



Take a break away from the stand from time to time and go and sit down. Standing and presenting work can be surprisingly tiring. Equally, make sure you drink plenty of fluid and eat even if it's very busy.

Keep an eye out for anyone 'hanging around the stand' or in any way acting suspiciously – notify organisers if you have any concerns.



Make sure that you have completed a risk assessment and that you are covered by public liability insurance.

Who are the public?

It's important to be aware that the public is a very diverse bunch of people. You'll probably meet all of these categories, and more:

- no specific interest, just browsing
- interested in the applications/implications and outputs of your research, not in how you do it
- school teachers wanting to enrich their lessons
- students with general interest
- interested in your science *per se*, i.e. how you do it, the technical details
- very knowledgeable about your area of science, either as scientists themselves or end-users

Once you have an idea of your visitors' likely interests you can focus on the parts of the exhibit most relevant to them, this may mean walking them to another part of the stand.

Do not force material on people, but it may be good idea to offer information leaflets as they leave, if they have not already picked one up.



Talking to people

Avoid Jargon

When you are working in a highly specialised field it is easy to forget that a lot of the terms you use daily mean nothing to most people.

Don't confuse using simple language with dumbing down; you can still get across the complexity and importance of the research without using jargon or formal scientific wording.

Just because you are presenting science, you don't have to speak as you would at a scientific conference. Instead, use the approach and style you would use with friends and family in describing your work.

Sometimes it is inevitable that you will need to use technical terms. This is fine as long as you explain clearly what the term means at the outset. In general use 'plain English' not science speak.



Science speak

Endeavour
Erroneous
Facilitate
Necessitate
Obtain
Supplementary
Approximately
Sufficient
Validate
Mechanisms
Methodology

Plain English

Try
Wrong, false
Help
Need, require
Get
Extra, more
About
Enough
Confirm
Systems
Process, way

Paint Word Pictures

Try to describe your work in ways that can easily be visualised. Use analogies and metaphors to help explain complex processes and liken things to everyday situations.

Topic

Infection, disease, corrosion
Diagnostics, monitoring
Energy flow, process
Chemical analysis

Possible descriptions

Warfare, invasion
Espionage, surveillance
Financial savings, expenditure
Food, recipes

Be honest

It is important to convey research findings and implications fairly, neither exaggerating potential application or potential risks, and where there is controversy it is best to be open, honest and realistic about it.

It is always best to be transparent. If you are carrying out research in a controversial area then acknowledge this – you don't have to dwell on it, but this is your chance to put your research in perspective to help the public understand the risk and the advantages.

Always make clear who funds the research and the contribution of other research groups.

Keep things in perspective. If you are talking about a breakthrough make sure people know it might be 20 years away. Likewise, if you are talking about risk put it in context, such as: "Travelling by car is more dangerous than..."

If you cannot answer a question say so, don't attempt to answer it or avoid it. Take the visitor's details and say you will get answer and get back to them (and do get back to them).

Using the Exhibit

Think of display panels as 'wallpaper'; they provide the backdrop for your presentation. They also provide specific examples and details to which you might like to draw visitors' attention. In general it is better to talk to people and use the panels and other artefacts to illustrate what you are saying. Do not point people to panels and expect them to read.



Do not use the same patter for everyone, target your messages. Remember people might be getting information overload from other displays so keep to one or two messages early on.

At the start, ascertain what your visitor's interest is. You might do this through asking them: "Have you come across this sort of research before?" or "Is this a particular interest of yours?" "Have you had a go at this interactive?" "Can you recognise these?" "Do you know what these are?" "Have you seen things like this?"

If you have things to give away at your stand it's a good idea to think about what visitors have to do to earn them e.g. fill in a form; play a game; spend some time talking to the exhibitors; nothing.

On the Day

Your approach

How the exhibitors behave and act can have a huge impact on the success of an exhibition.

Do

- ... assume your visitors to be very intelligent, but not necessarily knowledgeable about your science – do not patronise (they may be Nobel Prize winning astrophysicists!)
- ... remember your visitors may be hesitant in engaging you in conversation – they do not want a lecture.
- ... put visitors at their ease – smile! Be pleasant and welcoming – not in ‘selling or educating’ modes.
- ... wear a name badge with your affiliation.
- ... treat your visitors with courtesy and respect at all times.
- ... remember visitors may have personal issues around the science e.g. relatives who are ill or have died as result of diseases you are researching, or financial losses, e.g. from crop and livestock diseases.
- ... be aware that ‘lab jokes’ rarely travel well to broader audiences!

Don't

- ... sit down and read books or papers on the stand as this may make you seem disinterested in your surroundings.
- ... stand with your arms folded as you may appear difficult to approach.
- ... just talk to you colleagues and ignore visitors.
- ... stand between your visitors and the exhibition panels/displays. Similarly do not ‘trap’ them inside the exhibit.
- ... either ‘pounce’ on them the moment visitors pause to look, or studiously ignore them when they are showing interest or looking as if they’d like to be engaged – compare this with how you want shop assistants to help you when you are browsing.
- ... be flippant, you never know who you’re talking to.
- ... eat and drink on the stand (unless it’s a buffet/reception event), it looks unprofessional.



Dealing with a stampede

At all exhibitions there are busy times and quiet times. The quiet times can be a good opportunity for exhibitors to look round the rest of the exhibition or take a break, but always leave someone to hold the fort.

Give some thought to how to deal with a lot of people turning up at once, some strategies that you might like to consider include:

- having a two or three minute speech ready that you can deliver to 10 or more people.
- sharing visitors around the exhibitors.
- making an arrangement with other stands that when you're busy you'll direct people to them and vice versa.

The exhibition as a whole

Find out at the start if there are any displays dealing with similar or related science. If so, make contact with those presenting and see if you can help each other by directing visitors from one stand to the other.

Establish good relations with your 'neighbours' and be considerate in terms of noise and territory – do not poach visitors on the fringes of neighbouring stands, wait until they have moved away.

Be prepared for visitors to expect you to know where the lavatories are, what time the exhibition closes etc.



Be polite and help where you can, if you have familiarised yourself with overall layout you will be able to interpret floor plans and maps quicker than visitors can.

Disasters!



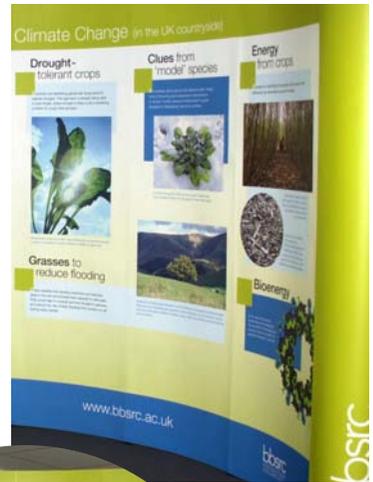
Unfortunately, there's a chance that something might go wrong: the computer you're using gets wet, lost, dropped; the animals in your display escape or die; all your colleagues are stuck on a train;

all your colleagues and you are stuck on a train; the space you thought you had is actually half the size; and more...

Make sure you have contact details with you of the venue/organisers, equipment suppliers, stand designers and other key people.

It's a good idea to run through how you expect the day to run and to think about what might go wrong and how you would deal with it.

In the end, people can be engaged and go away feeling happy just by talking to a lone eloquent and enthusiastic exhibitor.



Contact

If you're a BBSRC funded researcher thinking of running an exhibition and want some help and guidance then please contact:

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01793 413 368
www.bbsrc.ac.uk/