Event Public Engagement

A guide for organising activities at public events

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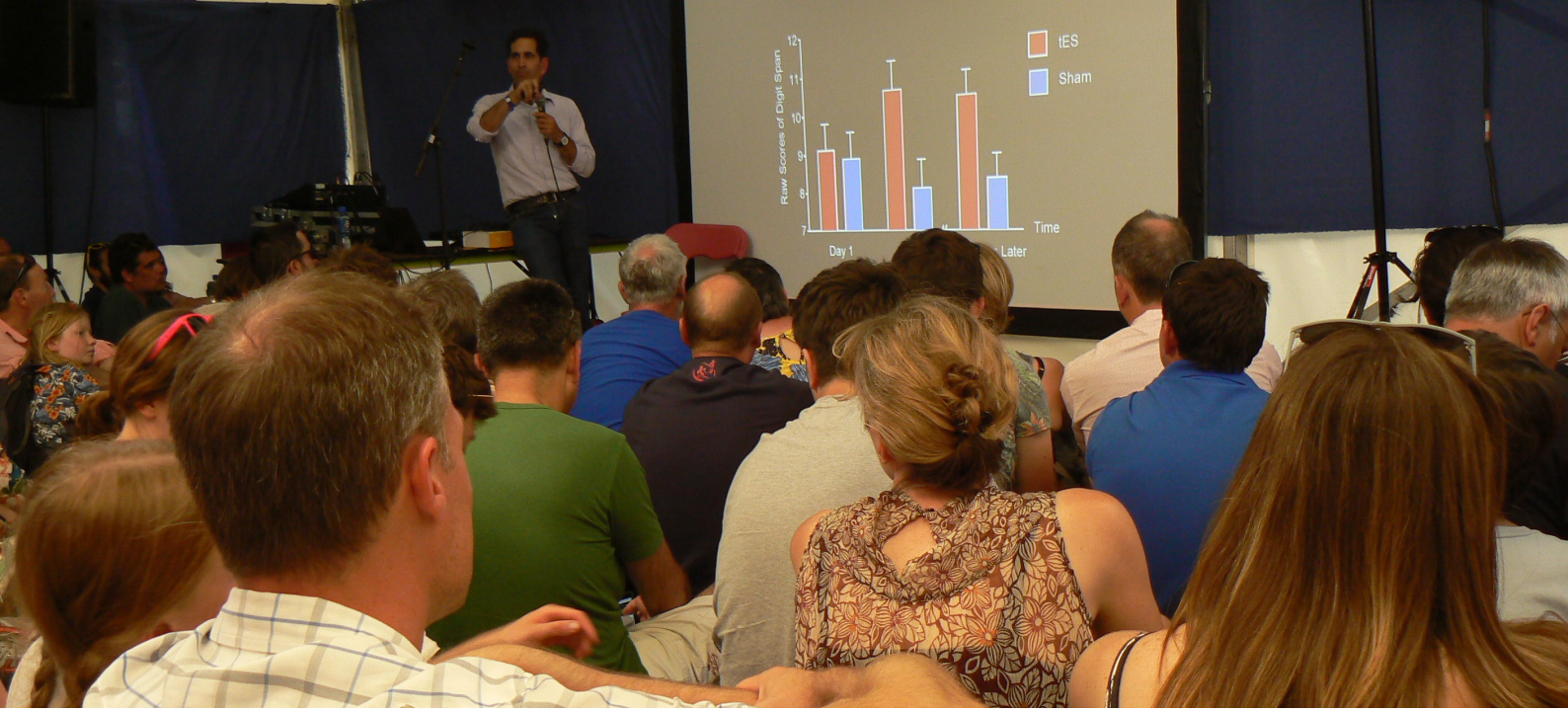

Event engagement

This leaflet is aimed at researchers or communications staff getting started with organising activities at public events. The full guide is available online at the Science Communication Unit website.

Which kinds of events?

There are hundreds of opportunities to share research with a wider audience:

- Local festivals, fairs or community days e.g. Harbourside Festival, Southmead Festival.
- Visiting a local community or interest group e.g. Women's Institute, local planning groups, University of the Third Age.
- School visits or workshops e.g. colleges, state schools, Ambitions event, Big Bang.
- Targeted science and engineering events e.g. Imagineering Fairs, Festival of Nature, Cheltenham Science Festival.
- Summer festivals with a national audience e.g. Green Man Festival, Latitude Festival.

To decide which event you would like to attend, you first need to think about WHY you are undertaking public engagement. Once you have a list of your aims and objectives, you should then know more about WHO you need to engage with. After that, you can then decide HOW you can interest and entertain audiences with your research. This is called strategic communication, and it is essential to understand and evaluate whether you have fulfilled your aims at the end of a project.

What is your big idea?

In order to interact with audiences, you first need to know what you are going to say. This means knowing the 'big picture' of your research story, including why your research matters and what you are doing about the problem. If in doubt, ask yourself (or someone else) "why should anyone care"?!

It is your job to make your project relevant to people. This means thinking about what people are interested in, what they know about, and what they are worried about, and then connecting your work to them. We must take the responsibility for making these connections; it is not the publics' responsibility to do this.

Event best practice

Research in science communication indicates that best event practice means:

1. Connecting your research into a context that people can understand. Use big ideas rather than too many details.
2. Using everyday language. Avoid jargon and technical terminology.
3. Using a hands-on activity to engage participants in conversation. Ensure there are enough staff to talk to multiple visitors at once.

Who are you talking to?

Picture your audience. Practice giving simple explanations – out loud – in advance. Ideally, test your ideas on people who aren't experts – maybe your children, your grandparents, or friends who work in something completely different. At public events it is usually better to start with the most simple answer you can manage, then judge from the person's reaction how much detail they might be interested in.

Before an event: What are the specific interests or needs of your potential audience? How does your work connect to everyday experiences and concerns? Are there popular television programmes or famous people that are relevant to your work? Has there been a big news story recently that you could make relevant?

During an event: Test your assumptions and different messages or ideas, and use the information they give you to make your examples and explanations more relevant.

Evaluating your activities

Public engagement can count as 'impact' from your research, but only if you provide evidence. That's why evaluating your efforts is increasingly important, both to show the impact for your audience but also for you as a researcher. Evaluation is also the only way to discover if you have been achieving your strategic communication aims.

All event strategies should include measureable outcomes for what you would like to achieve. Evaluation should therefore start here, in order to determine whether you met your original aims. You may also wish to gather feedback from your audiences to reflect on their experiences, and to provide ideas for future improvements.

Methods to consider at live events include:

- Event observations
- Snapshot interviews
- Questionnaires
- Feedback boards
- Photo booths
- Voting stations
- Suggestion boxes and cards

Photo credit: Jade Duggan

Events checklist

Why are you interested in public engagement?	
Who do you want to reach?	What do you want them to find out?
Where is a good location for your outreach?	
What events are available?	Which events have relevant audiences?
What will you do at the event?	
Stands with hands-on activities?	Talks, chats, short activities?
Who will staff your event?	
Does your staff include a range of people?	Are you offering a range of role models?
How will you make your activity interesting for the public?	
Simple, accessible explanations	Fun, engaging materials and activities
Will you record and/or evaluate your engagement?	
Photos, evidence	Evaluation methods

Interacting at events

- Ask questions
- Invite people to take part
- Provide touchable objects

Research role models

For Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) public engagement, including a diverse mix of representatives or activity leaders has a proven positive impact.

Female aspirations and grades increase if they are offered successful female role models - girls need to see women participating too. The same applies to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students, coined as ‘the Obama effect’.

In short, seeing someone who “looks like you” undertaking an activity makes you more likely to consider taking part yourself, and can improve your confidence and willingness to try when you do take part. By facilitating events with a wider range of people, more of your potential audience are likely to engage, get involved, and learn.

Representing your research

- Choose a demographic mix when selecting event staff. The more diversity (gender, ethnicities, physical abilities or class backgrounds) you put in the room impacts how many students are seeing ‘their future selves’ as STEM participants and higher education achievers.
- Think about your case studies. Where can historical examples or real-life case studies include underrepresented groups? Show pictures of women or people from BME backgrounds undertaking examples of your research (even if they are not from your team) on your slides or handouts. It might seem small but giving more role models makes a difference.
- Describe stories in your research using a woman as the protagonist. Alternatively use both ‘he’ and ‘she’ pronouns when describing researchers.
- Don’t simply say that ‘women or people from BME backgrounds can do this too’ - prove it!

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