Event Public Engagement

A guide for organising activities at public events

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Introduction

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.

To decide which events 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.

Why events?

Events can be time consuming, but are ultimately rewarding! They offer:

- A way to connect and strengthen relationships with audiences who are already interested in your research area. Audiences may be keen to learn more or may want to get involved in research.
- A way to reach audiences that may not seek out your research area, but could be interested in talking face-to-face with a person. By doing events in different areas or neighbourhoods or targeting community events, you can broaden the reach and impact of your research.

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, what they are worried about, and 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 grandmother, 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.

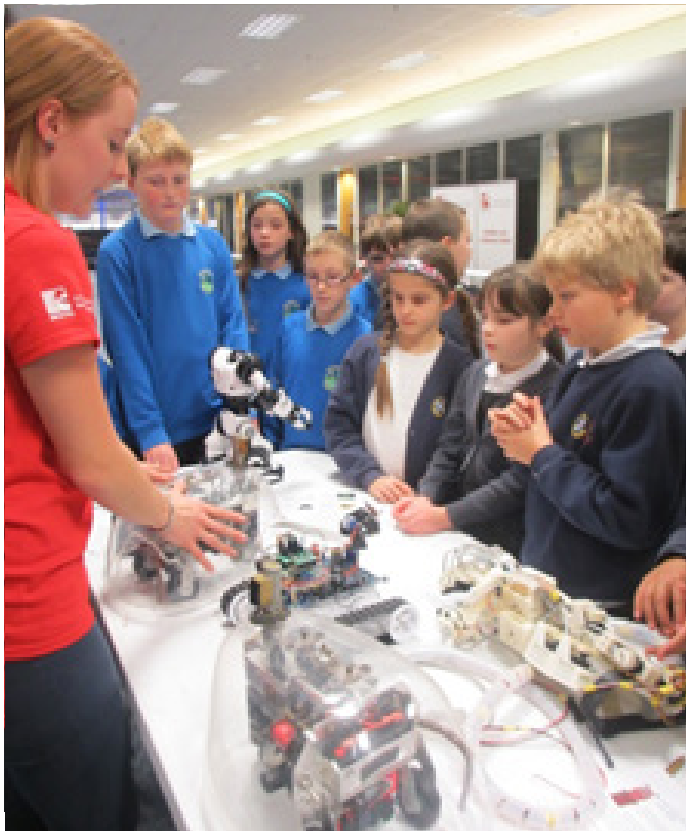
Evaluating your activities

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 strategies 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 provide a reflection of their experiences, and 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



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

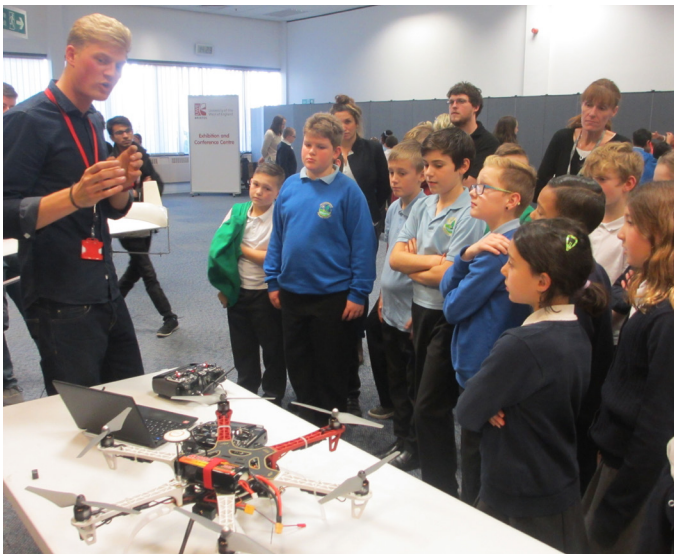
Interacting at events

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

Research role models

You can make a difference to audience perceptions and aspirations in your field by making sure your team includes a diverse mix of representatives or activity leaders.

For Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) public engagement, this has a proven positive impact. Female aspirations and grades increase if they are offered successful female role models. Male aspirations are not reduced by being offered female role models. 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.



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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