

MAXIMIZING AN EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHER'S EXPOSURE AT CONFERENCES: POSTER OR ORAL PRESENTATION?

When I first arrived in research-led science, I was skeptical of the benefits of giving a poster. It seemed to me like an escape for those who are afraid of standing up and giving an oral presentation. I was, of course, naïve and overconfident in my relative ability. Over the course of my graduate degree, my opinion has changed. Now I think the two options are of equal importance.

It would be nice if all abstracts were judged solely on their scientific merit, but in reality, I think that many conference conveners believe that researchers with big reputations will deliver a quality talk. In contrast, they probably think that abstracts by researchers establishing themselves in a field have smaller track records and so may be viewed as “risky” for a talk. Talks are traditionally viewed as giving a researcher more exposure. Many early-career researchers are given, or apply for, posters. In theory, a poster should give you the same amount of exposure, or even more, if supervisors and mentors introduce you to the big names and make sure that relevant researchers come to your poster. But this is not much use if you attend a conference with no senior champion from your institution or home country.

How do early-career researchers make their name? How can they make their voice and their science heard in the cacophony of noise that characterizes the average conference venue? Does a presentation or a poster provide a bigger hit?

My Early Experience

My first scientific presentation was at a relatively small conference. My talk was somewhat shaky, and a researcher who thought almost exactly the opposite of me summarily took me down. I'm sure there were other esteemed scientists there who would have easily torn me to shreds had they not shown mercy on my new scientist's soul. But I was still green and giddy with excitement at being involved in scientific research, and I got encouraging words from many a good scientist: a big tick for the oral-presentation format.

After a few small conferences, I finally went to a large international meeting two years ago. I was anticipating a big international audience. Unfortunately, although I realized there would be 16 or so parallel sessions, I had not counted on being scheduled against a superstar keynote lecture in my field. My own talk had an attendance of around eight people. I am sure that we all wished we were seeing Dr. Superstar instead!

In the end, I got a couple of quick questions, along with a few congratulations at the end of the session, and maybe fifteen minutes of discussion with a couple of interested parties. I couldn't help but feel slightly deflated. I had done my job, given my talk, but it wasn't enough. The poster sessions were excellent, and I felt like I had made the wrong choice.

Lessons Learned

Last year, I was determined not to make the same mistake and headed off for a smaller international conference, armed with my very first poster. It was my pride and joy, having spent nearly a month honing the figures and working out what I wanted to show and say.

The poster session was one of the best scientific events I have been to yet. Best of all, it was held outdoors, on a lawn under palm trees, next to the beach (photo). I think the conference had the perfect number of delegates (400 in total) for a poster session. It was small enough that almost everyone read all the poster titles, but large and specialized enough that there were lots of interested people there.

The poster session was one of the most tiring two hours I've ever spent. I had an almost constant stream of people coming and asking questions. Probing and inquiring: What have I done? What do my data show? Did I think about this? Why didn't I do that? Have I considered



the possibility of being completely wrong? It is exhausting to have to stand there and defend your poster and your work as academic after academic comes over and tries to pick holes in it all. It felt like being a lawyer in court, standing up and arguing for the defendant (my PhD) in the face of a barrage of questions. But it was fun! Bar a couple of people who seemed to instantly dismiss my research field, most were enthusiastic about what I had done and were certainly keen on seeing the record published. I talked to some great academics, both established and up and coming. It was exhausting, yes, especially being out in the hot sun, but it was quite an experience.

The overall reach of a poster is probably less, but in terms of communicating with those who matter, those who are interested, then a poster is far more penetrating. It certainly beat my experience of giving a talk.

A Dependency on the Conference Itself

My opinion of the quality of poster sessions largely correlates with the adequacy of the air conditioning. I have been to three cramped, hot poster sessions, and have tended to escape very quickly. This is in stark contrast to two light and airy sessions where I feasted on new scientific knowledge.

The reach of an average early-career scientist's presentation has a lot to do with the size of the conference. At a small conference with only a couple of parallel sessions, a talk will almost always have good attendance. At a larger conference, there are so many talks that you can easily get lost in the noise and a poster will stand out more. But is there a point at which there are so many posters that, once again, your tree fades into the woods?

Which leads me to my current situation. By the end of the successful poster session, I had been offered a postdoctoral position... to work with one of the researchers who attended my poorly attended, but successful, talk a year earlier. So, I am pleased that two presentations on my PhD topic were enough to convince a potential employer to offer me a job. Was it the poster, the oral presentation, a combination of the two, or none of these that got me the job offer? I guess I'll never know, but at least now I am happy with both approaches to conference presentations.

GETTING YOUR POINT ACROSS

- *AGU poster guidelines*
<http://fallmeeting.agu.org/2012/scientific-program/poster-session-presenter-guidelines>
- *Visual communication*
http://elementsmagazine.org/processIP.lasso?number=e3_2&filename=dutrow.pdf
- *Making effective presentations*
www.geosociety.org/graphics/eo/Effective_Presentations.pdf
- *Giving good talks*
www.geol.wvu.edu/rjmitch/stoning.pdf
- *Designing conference posters*
<http://colinpurrington.com/tips/academic/posterdesign>
- *A letter to poster-session organizers*
<http://colinpurrington.com/2012/open-letter-to-poster-session-organizers>

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