

Event Public Engagement

A guide for organising activities for public events



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1. Introduction

This guide is aimed at researchers organising activities at public events. The researchers might be scientists, engineers, academics, or communications staff, but their common aim will be to engage the public with research.

We recognise that every open day, event or festival is different, and each will have varying audiences, staffing, resources, and expectations. However, across these public engagement practices there are commonalities in how we can access and engage with different audiences. It is with this goal in mind that the guide aims to act as a starting point for researchers hoping to plan new activities or reach different audiences.

2. Event planning

Public engagement is a core part of the research process; it does not just involve dissemination at the end of a project but it is a way to inform, influence, and guide the research throughout¹. Public engagement can take many forms and includes community involvement, policy advocacy, social media, blogging, and schools outreach. This guide focuses on live events which the public freely chooses to attend (i.e. not in formal schooling programmes).

Why attend events?

Live, in-person events offer a unique opportunity for public engagement with research. Events vary enormously, ranging from community festivals to large-scale lecture presentations. Even in an increasingly digital world, events play a special role in people's lives, with the social context at least as meaningful as the content and messages delivered².

Previous research indicates that both event organisers and audiences assert that public events provide powerful science engagement experiences: practitioners argue that there are many learning outcomes from events; and audiences report that they attend science events with the intention of learning about science and cutting-edge research, along with the chance to meet university staff and researchers themselves^{3,4}.

¹ RCUK. (2010). *Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research*. Retrieved from <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/per/Pages/Concordat.aspx>

² Durant, J., Buckley, N., Comerford, D., Fogg-Rogers, L., Fooshee, J., Lewenstein, B., & Wiehe, B. (2016). *Science Live: Surveying the landscape of live public science events*. Retrieved from <https://livescienceevents.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/2016-science-live-landscape-survey.pdf>

³ Jensen, E., & Buckley, N. (2012). Why people attend science festivals: Interests, motivations and self-reported benefits of public engagement with research. *Public Understanding of Science*. doi:10.1177/0963662512458624

⁴ Fogg-Rogers, L., Bay, J.L., Burgess, H., & Purdy, S.C. (2015). 'Knowledge is power': a mixed methods study exploring adult audience preferences for engagement and learning formats over three years of a health science festival. *Science Communication*, 37 (4). pp. 419-451. ISSN 1075-5470 Available from: <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/25328>

So events offer two main opportunities:

- A way to connect with audiences who are already interested in your research area and who are keen to learn more or may want to get involved in the research process.
- A way to reach audiences that may not seek out your research area, but could be interested by an opportunity to find out more and talk 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.

Why do you want to engage with the public?

Many researchers start by thinking about *how* they would like to do public engagement but this is the exact opposite of where you should begin!

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. Please see Figure 1 and Tables 1 and 2 for more information.

Figure 1: Strategic communication is targeted

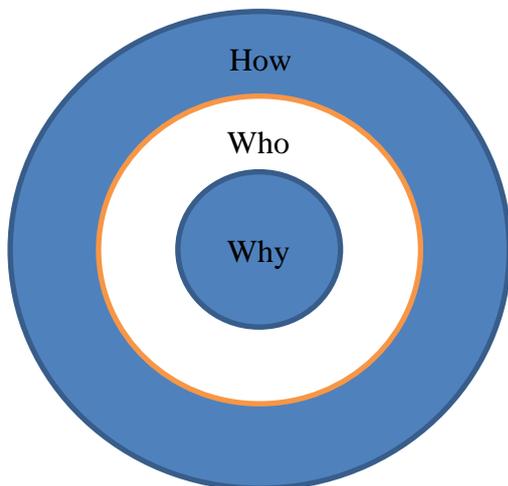
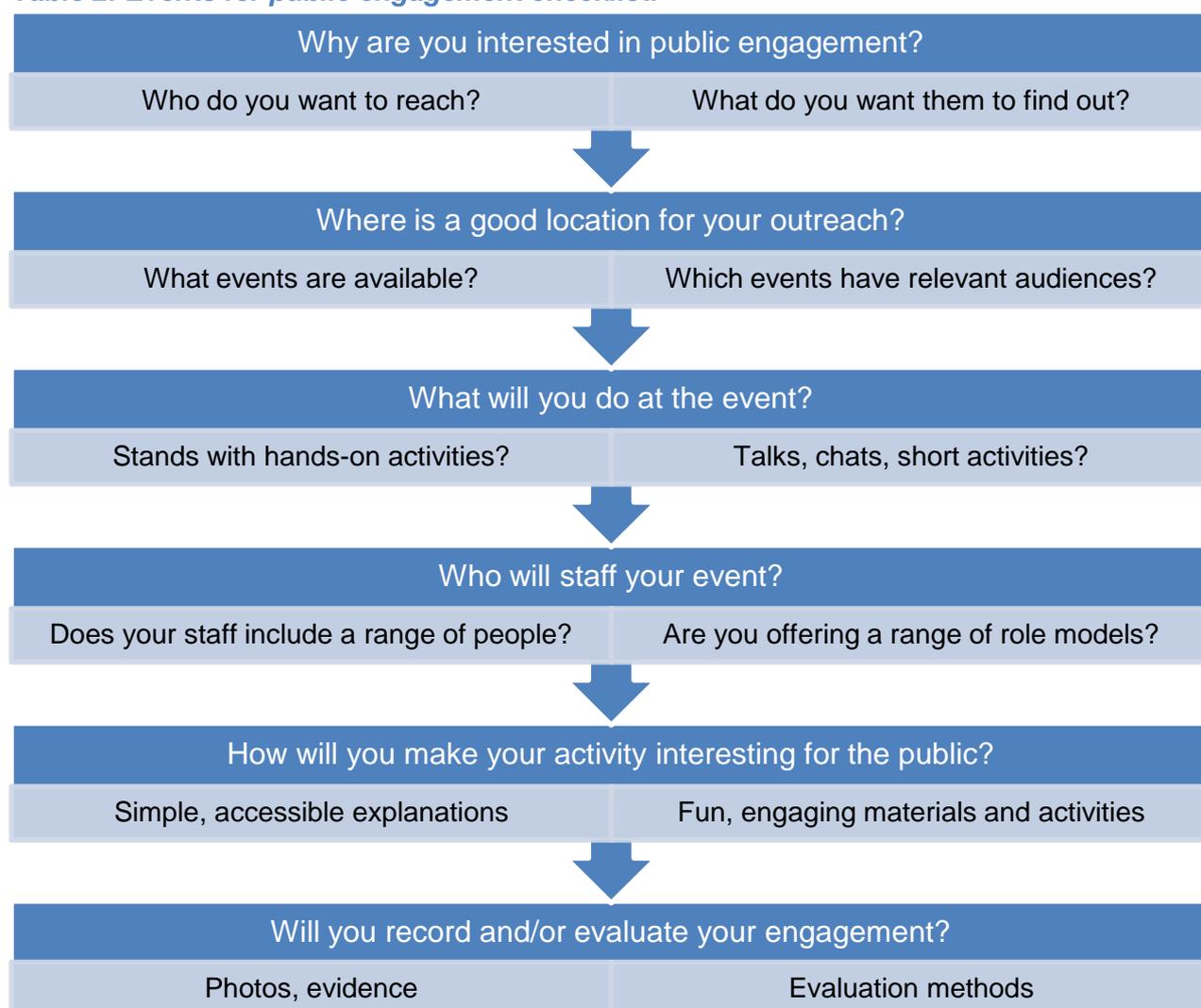


Table 1: Examples of strategic communication planning

Research area	Why	Who	How
Developments in aerospace technology	To get more people interested in engineering; share interest in engineering	Young people and their families; Adults already excited about engineering	Go to community events that appeal to families; have activities that appeal to teenagers as well as younger children; Bring kit that shows off what can be done; Careers information for parents/teenagers.
The application of mathematics in financial services	To get more people interested in studying maths, show the breadth of maths research	Young people and their families, Adults	City centre event that appeals to a range of people; Some activity for young people and adults; Visual info about exciting/important areas where maths gets applied/job prospects

Table 2: Events for public engagement checklist:



Choosing your event

Different events attract different audiences, so it is helpful to think about who you want to talk to before deciding where you want to go, and being aware of the type of audience you might expect at an event so you can cater for their interests.

Often, research will not have a specific target group, so generic city centre events can seem the easiest to catch all audiences. However, sometimes it can be worth targeting other groups who may not attend a city centre event, such as thinking about neighbourhood festivals or groups that work with a specific cohort of people. This broadens the range of groups that the university is engaging with, and may bring benefits to your research area by hearing from alternative groups or perspectives.

Depending on your funding or aims, you may need to measure or record your activities. You can think about measurable outcomes (see section 6) and you can make sure to plan for recording your event. Table 3 indicates the types of events you could consider.

Table 3: Types of Events

Type of activity	Type of audience	Date/time	Type of interaction	What is the first step to make this happen?
City centre festival	Families (middle class)	Weekend	Stall, chatting	Contact festival organiser or university representative
Professional development event	Professionals	Working hours	Formal talk	Contact network admin
Community activity for older people in poorer area	Older people (working class)	Working hours	Informal talk, chatting	Contact activity organiser
Community event in ethnic minority community	Ethnic minorities, families	Weekend	Stall, chatting	Contact activity organiser
Meeting for association of disabled people	Disabled people, their friends and families	Evening	Informal talk, chatting	Contact activity organiser

Once you know who and where you would like to go, you can think about the following questions.

*How far in advance to you need to ask permission to attend/include your information? Who do you need to contact? Do you have enough staff/helpers available for larger events? How will you and your staff get there with equipment?

*What resources will be helpful at this type of interaction to get people to engage with you? How can you make your research relate to them specifically? What materials do you need for publicity (print leaflets, make posters etc.) or for people to interact with at events (things people can touch or try themselves, kit to attract attention etc)?

*What publicity do you need to do to make sure people attend the event? Can you do local media interviews, get included on the event organisers' mail-outs, post in local community forums, tell everyone you meet, share it with other staff etc.?

3. Event best practice

Research in science communication⁵ indicates that best event practice means:

- Connecting your research into a context that people can understand
- Using big ideas rather than too many details
- Avoiding jargon and technical language
- Using a hands-on activity to engage participants in conversation
- Ensuring there are enough staff to talk to multiple visitors at once
- For more information see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgjAc9co9YU>

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"?!

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 more detail they might be interested in.

Connecting with the public

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 public's responsibility to do this. Figure 2 gives an example of thinking about the different aspects of a research project that would be more relevant to different audiences.

⁵ Peterman, K. & Young, D., 2015. Mystery Shopping: An Innovative Method for Observing Interactions With Scientists During Public Science Events. *Visitor Studies*, 18(1), pp.83–102. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2015.1016369>

Before an event: Think about the type of audience. What are their specific interests or needs? Are they older people? Families? From particular communities? 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? How does your work connect to everyday or common experiences and concerns?

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.

Figure 2: The big idea for air pollution and society.



Interacting at events

Most people don't usually go up to a stranger and start a conversation, so don't expect many people to do this to you at a festival or event! Frequently, we must do the hard work of starting the interaction.

A good way to start an interaction is to ask a question, or invite people to participate in something.

- ✓ Ask a question
 - Something people will be interested or curious about to catch their attention
 - Something that will make people think, but that is easy to understand
 - Something a bit funny or silly (if this is your style)
 - You might want a version for adults and a version for children/families
- ✓ Invite them to take part in an activity. Please remember to also introduce yourself and where you are from!
- ✓ Have interesting objects, statements or activities clearly visible so that passers-by can see there is something fun that they can do.

4. Event materials

Events are social experiences and audiences are primarily attending in order to have a good time with others. This means that they want to be entertained as well as learning about your research. It is therefore good to have materials and activities that appeal to all ages and that can occupy multiple audience members at once.

Activity ideas for family events

At a busy stall you may want to consider a variety of activities which are aimed at adults as well as occupying children at the same time. You may also want to consider recruiting enough staff to your stall/event so that you can engage with multiple visitors simultaneously. Table 4 shows the types of activities you may want to consider.

What works:

- ✓ 3D objects that people can touch and hold, not just paper/diagrams/information boards
- ✓ Objects that are large enough to see from a distance (e.g. need two hands to hold)
- ✓ Toys, bright coloured objects or lights to draw attention
- ✓ An activity where people get to do something or complete a quick challenge
- ✓ A low table where children can draw pictures or get involved in an activity
- ✓ A camera and "photo booth" where people can dress up or hold objects related to the theme, with a screen showing the images (can be linked to social media)
- ✓ Balloons, stickers or other cheap give away materials (not whistles or anything that makes loud noise!)

Table 4: Example materials for different types of event

Event type	Materials
Large city event, few staff = “mobile interactions”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No stand or banner - Clipboards and pens - Name badges and appropriate clothing to approach people - Phone/camera to take picture for social media/project records
Community daytime event with families, two staff = expo stand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Banner - Research handouts - Activity for children/families (e.g. balloons, map) - 1 staff member focuses on families/entertaining children, other looks to engage adults in participation - Phone/camera to take picture for social media/project records
Event at community group, one staff = informal talk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Banner - PPT/notes - Research handouts - Phone/camera to take picture for social media/project records

Be prepared for events

It is advisable to undertake a Risk Assessment before attending an event. We suggest the following as a basic events survival kit:

1. Your materials
2. Your own business cards if you have them, or use your research postcards/leaflets for contact details
3. More than one pen
4. Water for all staff
5. Clothing/protection against weather if outdoors
6. A way to take pictures at the event for the project records and evaluation (smartphone etc.)
7. Contact information for event organiser and all project staff, and leave your details with an external contact

5. Staffing events

It is really important to staff your event with people who are keen to engage with the public; they need to be friendly, welcoming and enthusiastic about the research topic. Your staff members will provide a first impression of the university as well as your project, and this needs to be a good one! People attend events for face-to-face interactions, and so it is also important to include enough staff members at your event to ensure you can talk to the audience in person as far as possible.

Research role models

Some projects also need to consider audience perceptions about the sort of people who do your research. For instance only 9% of engineers are women, and with an industry staffing shortfall, more work is urgently needed to encourage more girls as well as boys to choose this career.

You can make a difference 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 models⁶. Male aspirations are not reduced by being offered female role models⁷.

The same applies to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students, coined as ‘the Obama effect’⁸. 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. While it may seem like a small difference, by considering who is representing your research you might be giving someone an example or a role model that could change the way they think about your field and even their own career choices.

We therefore need to think carefully about who is doing the interactions at events, and what impression this gives out. This is also important in communities with higher ethnic minorities or with lower socio-economic status – you need to think about how they will perceive you and your team. A good way to think about the team you want to send to an event is to have the aim of reflecting the audience of the event in terms of gender/background, rather than reflecting the industry or field that you work in.

⁶ Fogg Rogers, L., Sardo, M. and Boushel, C. (2017) Robots vs animals: Establishing a culture of public engagement and female role modelling in engineering higher education . *Science Communication*, 39 (2). pp. 195-220. ISSN 1075-5470 Available from: <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/30921>

⁷ Lockwood, P. (2006). “Someone like me can be successful”: Do college students need same-gender role models? *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 30, 36–46.

⁸ Marx, D. M., Ko, S. J., & Friedman, R. A. (2009). The “Obama Effect”: How a salient role model reduces race-based performance differences. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(4), 953–956.

Ideas to consider:

- ✓ 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!

6. Evaluation at events

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. Table 5 shows an example communications plan.

Table 5: Example Communications Plan

Message	Audience	Format	Timescale	Measurable Outcomes
Air pollution is bad for our health	Families	City centre festival tabletop activity	June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numbers attended • Surveys completed • Pledges for change in behaviour • Evaluation interactions and messages
We need to find ways to replace car travel	Policy makers	City seminar event	October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numbers attended • Social media interactions to invite people • Surveys completed

Evaluation methods

Methods to consider at live events include:

- ✓ Event observations
- ✓ Snapshot interviews
- ✓ Questionnaires
- ✓ Feedback boards or photo booths
- ✓ Suggestion boxes and cards

For more ideas and information about undertaking evaluation at events, please contact the Science Communication Unit.

Ethics

If you want to gather data from the public which you will then publish in your research, you will need to gain Ethical Approval from an ethics committee. Ethics consent means that you have provided information about the points below, and the audience members have consented to take part (informed consent). This includes:

- ✓ What data you are gathering and from whom. This is usually provided in a Participant Information Sheet, or a public notice e.g. a poster.
- ✓ How this information will be used, stored and published in your project.
- ✓ Adult audience members will then either continue to take part (assumed consent) or will sign a Consent Form.
- ✓ Children (under 18s) can participate providing they gain written consent from an adult. Safeguarding advice for children and vulnerable persons can be found here: <http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/research/researchethics/guidance.aspx>.

Enjoy yourself!

This guide is intended to help you get started with public engagement at events. If you have any further questions then please contact the Science Communication Unit team!



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