



Poster displays are an increasingly popular way of presenting the results of research and new patient services. Dr Catherine Duggan gives some tips on how to make the best of your work.

The poster is a display of written and graphic information mounted on a board. It may take the form of a single, large sheet of paper or it may be made up of sections which are mounted separately. Because you can use both writing and figures, a large amount of information can be displayed.

Poster display sessions have become well supported at pharmacy meetings and conferences. Posters provide a vehicle for exhibition of descriptive or experimental work without the nerves behind an oral presentation to a large audience. Some poster displays also include 'discussion sessions' in which members are invited to give a more informal presentation of their poster to small groups. They can be good experience for presenters as practice for formal presentation of research at a conference.

A poster should not be regarded as a 'second-best' option or a vehicle for sub-standard or incomplete work. Successful poster presentations draw on a different range of skills from those used in formal oral presentation. The poster is an invaluable way to communicate information, a medium we should fully exploit. We should seek to make our posters readable and attractive and this article presents advice on how to plan, design and present posters more effectively.

Advantages?

The main benefits of presenting a poster are described in Table 1. As a rule, only those with an interest will attend, providing you with an opportunity to talk to them on a one-to-one basis. This is definitely less intimidating than the prospect of a formal presentation. Another clear benefit is the opportunity to display visual material such as graphs, charts, etc, for leisurely perusal, as it will be better understood shown in this form than as a rapid succession of slides.

To a member of the 'audience', a poster session has several advantages. Firstly, an attendee can attend work of particular interest, without having to listen to other presentations. Secondly, posters provide the opportunity to seek answers to questions directly and informally from the authors, a less intimidating experience than the prospect of asking clarifying

questions that may seem 'dim' amidst a large and knowledgeable audience. Thirdly, information can be absorbed at your own pace, as there is an opportunity to go back to take a second or even third look.

Table 1. Advantages of a poster.

- One-to-one contact
- Opportunity to meet interested and interesting people
- Opportunity to answer lots of questions (not just criticisms)
- Using time well
- Useful experience and practice for giving conference presentations

Planning

As soon as you hear that your abstract has been accepted, you should make a booking with your Medical Illustration department sufficiently far in advance to give you time to design the display carefully. It pays to take the time to explain fully your requirements and to accept expert advice. At this stage it would be helpful to know the size and shape of the display board and the preferred means of mounting the poster. All these details will be provided by the conference organisers and could influence the way in which the medical illustration team prepare the material. If you have to transport the poster a long distance, you may need to consider equipping yourself with a suitable artist's folio.

Designing your poster

The first step in poster design is to decide which information to display. It is not necessary to include every detail, but it is essential that a reader should grasp the meaning of your poster without the need for detailed explanations. Displaying data in the simple way possible is difficult and requires discipline and attention (Table 2). It is important to think clearly about the message you wish to convey and to give yourself time to draft-review-redraft. The essential elements of the poster should be arranged in a logical sequence, usually from left to right: introduction/ background-aims-methods-results-conclusions/evaluation/ summary (\pm references).

A poster cluttered with data is not attractive and will not hold an audience. The poster's written elements deserve careful preparation.

To begin, there should be a clear but succinct introduction and statement of aims to help the audience with some context for why the work is important and what it aimed to add to existing evidence. The rest of the material should follow logically and does not need to be much more elaborate than a set of slides for use in a talk.

In preference to lots of written text, colourful, flow diagrams, histograms or pie charts should be used to display data wherever possible. Relationships between variables and complex findings can be taken in at a glance when figures are (appropriately) displayed, and bold illustrations always attract the reader's eye.

The poster must be legible from a distance of about four feet. This prevents crowding at your poster and allows the timid viewer to take it in without coming too close and feeling obliged to speak to you.

Hand-written material is not really suitable for this kind of display and with the increased use of eg: PowerPoint, electronic posters are increasingly easy to create. Whilst the best displays are produced professionally by medical illustration or photography departments, DIY is possible using suitable software and printers, even using 'Letraset' or stencils. DIY approaches are most often very time consuming.

Most hospital illustration departments have experience of producing poster material for clinical conferences and will be able to give help and advice. Many have word processing, graphics and printing facilities, which allow choice of optimum layout and font.

Obviously the use of colour or illustrations in your poster will make it visually more interesting and help attract the reader. Most posters are assembled in sections, which are eventually mounted in a logical order; alternatively many departments have a poster "template" which they then format to the required size.

The size of the board that your poster will be displayed on is 6ft x 3ft landscape. Ensure that your poster fits comfortably within these parameters.

Table 2. How to make the most of your poster.

- Make sure the content is OK
- Include photographs, figures and colour to make it visually attractive
- Space your text and figures to make it easy to read
- Use clear headings and conventional format (Aims, methods etc) to fit with the conference requirements
- Avoid too much text
- Take advice

Once you have the content and design sorted out, sketch a plan of how the sections fit together on one sheet and use this as the starting point for your discussions with the medical artist. However, when you go to see the artist, be prepared to take any advice to make the display better.

The presentation session

Before setting off for the conference, always ensure that you know how the poster is to be mounted and ensure that you take drawing pins, sticky tape, Velcro, etc. whilst most conference organisers will provide mounting materials, it's a good idea to bring some spares!

On the day, remember it takes about 30 minutes to find your poster space and mount your poster (along with everyone else) so allow sufficient time. It is your job to ensure that your poster is taken down by the specified time as there are often many poster sessions.

You need to be present for time required. You should look approachable and be able to give a succinct explanation (no more than two minutes) of the work to those interested. A longer explanation could be boring and will be exhausting to have to repeat it many times. Often people need a few words to set the material in context. Don't forget to take along a notebook so you can note down interesting points and the names and addresses of useful future contacts.

You may wish to prepare a brief hand-out for viewers to take away: it's often easiest to print off copies of PowerPoint posters on A4 sheets. Make sure your contact details are included. In this way the poster session can achieve more than a brief oral presentation crammed into a busy conference programme. By helping to bring people together selectively to talk about an area of common interest, the poster session can initiate contacts and networks in pharmacy which can serve to advance new ideas and collaborations.

Finally, giving a poster presentation is both enjoyable and tiring. You have the opportunity to speak to many people and discovered what is going on in your area of interest. It is a highly stimulating and motivating experience. Hopefully this article provides useful information for poster presentations as well as acting as a checklist for less experienced presenters.

Good Luck!

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