COMMUNICATION NOTES

DESIGNING A GREAT POSTER

A clear and engaging poster can be an effective way to get your message across. Here are some things to think about before investing in glue and poster board.

Your message
Think about who will be looking at this poster. Try tailoring the poster to your audience, or make it clear enough so that anyone - even a member of the general public - could understand it.

Identify the most exciting, innovative, and relevant aspects of your research that can be easily generalized. This is what will catch your audience's attention. A title that captures the audience's imagination can be very effective as well.

Hook your audience by clearly stating your research question, findings and any available conclusions in plain, jargon-free language. They will decide in just a few seconds whether or not they are interested, so you don't want them struggling to understand your ideas.

Avoid putting excessive methodological and technical details on posters. They are important to you, but they probably aren't as important to the viewer, and they aren't likely the most exciting aspects of your research. Use handouts (make sure you have enough of them) to cover these kinds of details, or discuss them with the viewer yourself.

Because the average viewer spends little time looking at your poster, only show data that add to your central message. The usual elements are title, authors, institutional affiliation and credentials, conclusions, context, approach and data. Handouts should contain this information as well, plus details like methods, bibliography, and contact information. Include your business card - future collaborative opportunities may be lost if your viewers can't contact you.

Proofread the poster for errors. And if you can ask only one person to review your poster, ask someone who is not closely involved with the project. He or she will see the poster as your viewers will, and will likely point out anything that's unclear.

Bricks and mortar
A great poster is clear, legible, well-organized and succinct. It takes ample time to create a good product. Don't wait for the last bit of data - tell the viewer about it, person-to-person.

Read the poster guidelines provided by conference organizers. Make sure your poster complies with them.

Decide what your main message is, measure the space you have, lay out your elements roughly, eliminate extra material, then start to develop individual components of the poster. Do not just put up excerpts from your written paper. Adapt your approach to the very different format of a poster.

Decide how you are going to transport the poster, and keep that in mind when choosing materials. Will you need to roll it up? Should it fit into carry-on luggage?

Use plain, large fonts that can be read from six feet away. Fancy fonts make it harder to read, no matter how large they are. Don't use more than two fonts on your poster. Large font size can also highlight your main points. Arranging the text uniformly leads the viewer through your material easily and quickly.

Use indents, justification, and various forms of formatting to highlight your main points and present the viewer with clear messages. Clearly label any graph axes, photographs, and illustrations. Avoid visual clutter and keep the ratio of text to graphics as low as possible.

Print the sharpest copy of data you can. Check that the images are accurate - images do not always

stay true when transferred between media. Check for consistency of print quality throughout your poster.

Mounting boards are an easy way to add a colour border around the elements in the poster. Choose complementary tones within and around elements that highlight the data and do not compete for attention. Good contrast reduces eye strain, making the poster more legible and visually interesting.

If you can, make your poster flexible enough to change in size by adding or omitting elements, allowing you to update data and bring the poster to different events.

Viewers read a poster like you are reading this page - from left to right and from top to bottom. The title should be at the top of the poster and the last element at the bottom right corner. Whether your elements are laid out in horizontal rows or vertical columns, be clear in your use of space and graphics to lead the viewer through your material; use arrows if necessary.

Up close and in person
Bring extra supplies to the place you are setting up the poster - pins, tacks, tape, velcro, paper, pens, etc. You never know what might happen.

The impact of your poster increases if you or a member of your team is standing with the poster to answer any questions about its content and to offer handouts that have more detailed information.

If you are standing with your poster, be prepared to guide people through your poster in two to four minutes with a short summary of your work. Prepare a short "speech" between two and four minutes long to explain your work. Be open to wherever the conversation leads. Again, remember to bring business cards or request forms with contact information on them.

The audience will respond well to humour, energy and style in your presentation - but make sure it's a style you are comfortable with.

PDF - 53 KB

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