

How to give the scientific poster presentation that everyone forgets

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First, believe that your work is more important, and more interesting, than the stuff that'll be hanging on either side of it. Don't worry a lot about the dimensions of the poster boards, or making a mock-up before the meeting. No one will mind if you cantilever your display over the edges of theirs. Assume that substance, not presentation, is all that really counts. Don't squander a lot of time mounting your material to easily-fastened posterboard or foamboard; stuff as important as yours can just be stapled up on bare poster frames and still draw flocks of viewers.

If you must use attractive backgrounds, maintain an air of modesty by using dark colors unlike all the whites and pastels you'll see around you. This will make your text and figures much less intrusive to the viewer; indeed, to the casual observer they may quite disappear. If you use several background colors, place them in interesting patterns that are unrelated to the organization of the poster's content. This will stimulate both sides of your viewers' brains rather than just leading them through a logical progression.

All of your ideas and data are equally important; there are no minor points. Protest the unfairness of space restrictions by completely papering your posterboard with closely-spaced text, tables and, as a last resort, figures. When you're done, a poster designed to be seen by hundreds of people in a few hours will require each viewer to stand within 1m and read for at least half an hour.

Since folks can decide whether, and how thoroughly, to view your poster, maintain an air of mystery that will seduce them into deciphering what it's about. Instead of just spilling the beans in plain, descriptive language, try the following techniques. Have a really long title. Squeeze it in using a small font - certainly less than 108-point (3 cm) type - which is easily readable at 3m distance, and preferably less than 72-point (2 cm) type. Make sure the title isn't excessively informative. For example, "Observations of Interspecific Interactions During Some Seasons at a Geothermal Site" is much more scientific-sounding than "Wolves Ambush Elk Drawn to Warm Yellowstone Waters in Winter." Use a large proportion of the allotted space for the authors' names and affiliations. After all, what's important here?

Reserve the really good stuff for the dedicated viewers. Remember that in poster sessions the serious readers, who are up against the boards, occlude the view of the cruisers in the aisles. You want to feel that viewers are pressing forward to find out what your poster is about because it's yours, rather than because they already found it interesting by taking a quick look from the back row. Make sure that's the way it happens. Don't pander to casual viewers by leading them through the logical flow with big, bold "take-home points" visible over the crowd. Place a long turgid abstract, printed in small (10 or 12-point) type, near the bottom-left corner of your poster. Everyone who wants to find his way through your ideas will be drawn into close fellowship. Don't allow them to comfortably stand back from the action by using 16-18 point type.

Place the major points low. This, and printing them in exactly the same font as supporting material rather than in bold type over 1 cm high (24-36 points), will ensure that big ideas are accessible only to first-row viewers. Test your headings by trying to read them from 3m away; if it's too easy, make them smaller.

Place the details high, preferably in no particular relationship to the points they support. To punish the riff-raff who lack sufficient initiative to push their way forward, put this material into lengthy text pages, not pictures ("a picture is worth one k-word!"). Justify both margins so readers' eyes have no landmarks to move from one line to the next, and make entire paragraphs bold or all caps to heighten the effect. Use a font smaller than the 14-18 point type that would allow them to read while hanging back a row or two. If you must sacrifice unreadable text to use a figure, make sure it too presents a challenge. All labels should be uninformative and require reference to the legend (e.g., "Group A," not "Fat Weasels"), in as small type as possible, and preferably in a color that differs only slightly from that of the background. In figure legends, devote plenty of space to "FIGURE 3", rather than merely using "3" followed by informative text. Place the legend some distance from the figure, and use lengthy descriptions to point out salient features rather than resorting to obvious things like arrows and strings.

The logical flow of the poster material should be in several horizontal rows, rather than in columns that occur in a left-to-right progression. This will require each viewer to walk back and forth across the width of the poster, right in front of it. The inevitable entanglements and collisions can substantially relieve monotony for the presenter.

If you have reached conclusions, don't just give them away in a bold, bulleted list. Embed them in a long recapitulation of your abstract, again in small type with justified margins. Place this at the lower right corner of your poster so it, like the abstract, can be a focal point for congestion.

By following these simple directions, you can be virtually assured of a few placid, undisturbed hours during the meetings. These times will occur while you are at your poster.