

Public Engagement at Festivals – Some Top Tips

The below tips on designing and delivering effective public engagement with research activities at festivals arose at a public engagement conversation – *Engagement at Festivals* – held at the University of Bath on 25 November 2015. With thanks to Sue Haydock (Economic & Social Research Council), Dr Andrew Ross (Bath Taps into Science Festival) and Emma Sackville (Centre for Sustainable Chemical Technologies).

Tips from the ESRC's Festival of Social Science

Festivals are an excellent way to promote your research to a wide audience. In 2015, the Festival of Social Science saw 220 events held across the United Kingdom, opening up social science research to diverse audiences.

For research to influence policy, it needs to be seen by a wide audience and the Festival is one means to achieve this. By taking part in the ESRC's national, annual Festival you can benefit from the prestige that comes from aligning with the Research Council but also, **benefit from their press and marketing operations that may bring your research to the attention of national policymakers.**

To design a good Festival event:

- **Be clear on who your exact audience is.** Policy makers? Young people? Families etc?
- **Decide on the goal of your activity** – are you looking to inform your audience, to listen to them, or to collaborate with them?
- Once you've decided on your audience, **put yourself in their shoes.** Think about their needs, what they'll be interested in. This will help you to decide, amongst other things, the 'hook' of your Festival activity for them, where and when best to deliver the activity etc.
- **Ensure that your activity is engaging** rather than just talking at people. Can exhibits be made interactive? Are there opportunities for people to ask questions? Can people have a go at something etc?
- If you're arranging an outdoors activity, **have a back-up** in case of poor weather.
- Give thought to how you can **make your activity different**, how you can make it stand out. Perhaps the subject matter is timely or controversial? Perhaps you're piloting a new method of engagement? Or trying to reach an under-represented group? Anything like this will make your activity stand out and help in promotion.

The ESRC has developed an **event organisers' guide** for those looking to take part in the Festival of Social Science – see: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/public-engagement/festival-of-social-science/organise-an-event/event-organisers-guide/>

Tips on engaging people with science at festivals

When engaging people with science research at festivals, it's worth bearing the following in mind:

- Festivals often attract family audiences so **have a mix of activities to hand** – whilst children are doing one activity, their parents can be doing another.
- **Do use posters but think about what you're trying to achieve with them.** Are they there to inform the public? To provide further explanation for your activity? Or to attract people to your stall? In many cases, it's the latter as you'll be on-hand to provide explanations and further information to the public. So think carefully as to how you might make your poster attractive. There's a useful guide at: <http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/doing-it/techniquesapproaches/developing-posters>
- Have a **quick 'hook' activity that can draw in passers-by**, bringing them in to your main activity. People can be nervous about approaching an activity 'cold', so having a 'hook' to hand can be helpful.
- Expect to be kept busy throughout the day so **schedule who'll be doing what, when.** Work in shifts, so that everyone has some time off throughout the day.
- At festivals, **people's engagement is often just fleeting.** Don't expect them to engage with you for 15 minutes or so! Better to deliver quick, snappy activities of no more than a few minutes in length.
- **Build some flexibility into your activity** in terms of people's varied levels of understanding. You may be surprised by how much certain people know, so it's useful to have the scope to go into more detail if required.
- **Don't forget to evaluate your activity**, both in terms of how you find it and in terms of your audience. Generic Learning Outcomes (see: <http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/toolstemplates/genericlearning/>) provide a useful frame for evaluating activities.
- **If you're engaging people at non-research related festivals (e.g. at music festivals) then you might need to work even harder to attract their initial interest.** They won't be expecting to be engaged about research, so having a great 'hook' activity will become even more important!