

Parallel Session 21: Science week: evaluating experiences

EUROPEAN SCIENCE WEEKS: FROM EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE TO LOCAL ACTION

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Abstract

The model of science events is diverse among European countries suggesting that each country has different objectives. Although a European perspective is necessary to align the general strategy of science awareness with the research and cultural policies, localization is a must in order to achieve the best results towards citizens. Science weeks should be organized, managed and promoted locally by local organizations that work close to the main target audiences. This implies that associations such as EUSCEA are relevant to coordinate and promote the local and national initiatives providing an added value to such events.

Key words: Science weeks, European perspective, target public, local initiatives

Text

The European Commission has launched the Science and Society Action Plan in order to bridge the gap between European science and European citizens. Among other activities, one of the main issues of the plan is supporting projects scheduled for the European Science and Technology Week (8-14 November 2004). Through its sponsorship of Science Week activities, the European Commission is determined to forge closer ties between the world of science and the lives of European citizens. One may imagine that the Science and Society Plan lays at the base of the European Research Area to assure the flow of human resources and public interest for its development. Moreover, the new kind of governance that arises from the deployment of the knowledge society asks for providing high-quality and readily understandable scientific information as well as increased access to scientific culture. Progress in science and technology can then be democratically understood, evaluated, studied and debated. Although this approach must be structured within a European perspective and based on traditional shared values of justice and solidarity, it is not fitted for action. Cultural diversity and local sensibilities cannot be programmed at the European level. Diversity in local cultures, languages, social structures, organizations, governance particularities, and so on, make it difficult to achieve the desired results using the top-down approach. European perspective is desirable but local action is essential.

Beyond every science week event lays a communication strategy. Ideally a single message should be send to a single target audience through a single channel. When you focus your target and message you have higher chances of

success. Because of the many features that intervene in the social, political and organizational environment, focusing can only be undertaken at the local level. All sets of details such as school calendar, local languages, local holidays, specific traditions, can influence the performance of science events as a communication phenomenon. As an example, it is hard for a European newspaper, radio channel, or TV to succeed because it is hardly impossible to attract public attention with a wide defocused European content. Local initiatives are much better in planning, managing, monitoring and evaluating communication events such as science weeks. The requirement by the European Commission that projects must have a European angle to qualify for EU support adds barriers to the desired outputs. Local initiatives have closer views of the needs and the attitudes of citizens than any European program may have.

A better approach to design activities fitted to specific audiences is to promote local initiatives instead of forcing the European dimension of the events. The European Science Events Association (EUSCEA) is an association of European organizations, who produce science communication events like science weeks, science days or science festivals (www.euscea.org). It gathers the interests of European organizers of science weeks and provides added value to the events through sharing experiences, maximizing resources, benchmarking and collaboration. Such association guarantees the maintenance of the cultural and local identities of European citizens.

Within the framework of EUSCEA, by the analysis of the events organized by the member organizations, one may detect the factors that make the local dimension so important. Classifying such factors following the scheme of any communication event (origin of the communication, message to transmit, channel of communication, and target audience), one may identify the following items:

- Origin: kind of organization (administration, university, foundation, association, etc.), culture of the organization, territorial dimension (local, regional, national), financial structure of the event, sponsoring entities, etc.
- Message: terminology of the event (science week, science days, science festival, science forum, etc.), subject (general or specific), scope (fun or academic), etc.
- Channel: calendar, schedule, frequency, venue of the event, format (exhibitions, shows, lectures, games, visits, excursions, workshops, Internet, etc.)
- Target audience: local culture, general public, specific targets (scholars, teachers, politicians, press members, local community, etc.)

As a conclusion, public awareness of science and technology has two approaches. First, a European perspective that provides everyone with general prospects should be undertaken by the European administration. Second, local action and associations of local (regional, national) organizers are essential to address the right message to the target audience using the best channel available.

