

12th International Conference on Public Communication of Science and Technology (PCST), Florence, Italy, 18-20 April 2012.

Published as book chapter in: Bucchi, M., & Trench, B. (Eds.) (2012). *Quality, Honesty and Beauty in Science and Technology Communication: PCST 2012 Book of Papers (Proceedings of the 12th International Conference "Public Communication of Science and Technology"*, Florence, Italy, 18-20 April 2012). Vicenza: Observa Science in Society, pp.153-154.

36. Science Museum On Tour – a new model of outreach

PCST-12 Proceedings

Toby Parkin and Grace Kimble, Science Museum, London

toby.parkin@Sciencemuseum.ac.uk; grace.kimble@Sciencemuseum.ac.uk

London's Science Museum is renowned for energetic, high-quality learning programmes that aim to enthuse participants about the creativity of science invention. Science Museum Outreach reached over 140,000 people in 2011/12, part of the total 2.7 million total on- and off-site visits last year.

The Science Museum Group (SMG) includes the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, National Railway Museum in York, and the National Media Museum in Bradford in addition to the Science Museum, London. The Outreach team is based in London; as well as travelling the UK their work has recently become increasingly international, with bookings from Ireland, Gibraltar, South Africa and Abu Dhabi in 2011.

The key to engaging a wide variety of people is the diversity of formats. Science Museum outreach includes science shows, workshops, storytelling, teambuilding and communication skills. Each of these formats is based on research, and individual programmes developed by incorporating audience feedback. The process ensures that the events surpass expectations and are pitched at a suitable level that will be appropriate and fun for audiences.

153

Recently, a new show 'Science Museum- Live On Tour!' has increased access to a wider audience. Originally the majority of outreach participants were children in school, but more recently science museum outreach has enlivened science in venues such as theatres, hospitals, festivals, businesses, libraries, prisons and even weddings!

Underpinning the model of high-impact, commercially viable public engagement with science is the philosophy of providing Life Enhancing Experiences for visitors. The aspiration across the SMG is that experiences are engaging, memorable and inspiring for all audiences.

The demand for Science Museum outreach exceeds existing capacity. This fact together with a high proportion of repeat bookings, commercial success, and positive feedback from press and participants demonstrates the popularity of taking science communication activities directly to audiences who may not be able to visit.

Increasing access to science is not only about physical barriers to accessing collections, but also breaking down intellectual barriers. One teacher commented:

'Presenters were able to convey tricky information in a very entertaining manner'

The emphasis on forming positive associations with science activities can provide immersive experiences for new audiences:

'A thoroughly enjoyable afternoon. Actually forgot where I was'

Audiences that are not currently attracted to science-themed events have been met at festivals; for example the Isle of Wight Festival and Bestival. It has proved beneficial to seek

alternative sites in addition to established science celebrations such as ‘The Big Bang’.

Reflecting on the lessons learnt from analysing feedback, recommendations become clear. It is important to balance education and entertainment in carefully planned sequences so that the ‘wow factors’ are backed up by evidence and development in scientific thinking. One of the outreach workshops develops pupils’ abilities in science communication by sharing the principles behind devising a science show segment. Pupils learn for themselves how to mix comedy with clear visual demonstrations that link to a narrative.

As shows have ventured into new public spaces, presenters have developed subtlety in moderating their style for specific audiences; this has been incorporated into new training for outreach staff. Consequently, the same product can be used with both school and informal audiences, when presenters match tone and adapt content flexibly.

Clearly it is important to match the presentation style to the audience expectations. However, one aspect is apparent for school outreach. Whilst teachers may have to impose a tight rule frame in classrooms, the magic of a Science Museum visit for children is that the show isn’t school. For a short time at least the normal parameters are changed. Science Museum explainers have the license to take more (managed) experimental risks in the name of science investigation than most adults in school would be allowed to, and shows are most memorable when this opportunity is used to maximum effect!



154

The unique feature of science museums, as opposed to science learning centres, are their collections. To reflect this, Science Museum outreach will be focusing on incorporating objects into outreach sessions, to physically increase access to collections as well as to expertise in science communication. In doing so, the aspiration is to inspire science literacy around the importance of objects that prompted scientific innovations.

References

Science Live on Tour

http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/educators/whats_on_for_your_group/events/events_for_schools/science_museum_live.aspx

Science Learning Department Research

http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/about_us/sharing_expertise.aspx