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Conference Presentations

Conference Presentations: Tips, Tricks and Traps

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Public speaking is frequently referred to "as the number one fear in life, well ahead of death" (Sawatzky, 2011, p. 37). Most agree that public speaking is daunting. However, in healthcare, sharing research and other initiatives is crucial, and public speaking is central to the dissemination of this new knowledge. Conferences in particular provide a great opportunity for sharing insights, and networking with our professional peers (Sawatzky, 2011). In this paper we discuss how to best navigate and use conferences to gain maximum benefit and exposure for your research activities including the pitfalls and grey areas around presenting research.

Conferences are a competitive and profitable business. It is important to evaluate which conference is the best fit for you and this will depend on the theme, location and costs/funding, professional group/organization, networking opportunities, and professional development that must fit in with work commitments. Meeting, forums, conventions, congress, and conferences alike bring together members with common professional, research, or social interests (Tretyakevich & Maggi, 2012). Whilst considering these factors, many of us are now being spammed with an array of conference choices at interesting destinations, however not all of these are legitimate. We know of cases where colleagues have arrived at a meeting venue, having paid a registration fee, airfare and accommodation, only to find no conference! Doing one's homework is therefore key to avoiding predatory conferences. Conferences not organized by a scholarly society or professional association are often found to be arranged by those seeking to profit from exploitation that prey on the necessity for researchers to disseminate their work and often boast substantial registration fees (Bowman, 2014). For example, in 2013, the US National Institutes of Health sent one such predatory conference organizer a 'cease-and-desist' letter (Prosser Scully, 2015).

Furthermore, these spurious conferences also are known to direct conference papers to predatory journals guaranteeing that papers submitted will be fast-tracked through the review process (Beall, 2015). It is therefore wise to investigate these journals via the variety of sources available for vetting, such as SCImago Journal & Country Rank or the Directory of Nursing Journals, maintained by this publication and the International Academy of Nursing Editors. Journals not appearing here may be deemed predatory. These predatory acts extend to appealing to the egos of potential speakers by referring to early career academics as "esteemed professors" and issuing invitations for keynote speakers (Prosser Scully, 2015). To lend credibility to the conference, such conferences are also

known to cite names of experts in the field who themselves are unaware of their listing or even worse, names are fabricated.

Associate Professor Jeffrey Beall, a well-known librarian at Auraria Library, University of Colorado Denver hosts a site called Scholarly Open Access. Beall (2015) recently posted an editorial on predatory conferences highlighting tips that revenue seeking companies may take to exploit researchers and these include combining several conference fields, fast review process (2 weeks turnaround acceptance), research awards are used as bait, limited presentation time (e.g. 15 minutes) so as to increase registrants that translates into greater revenue as exemplified in this Scholarly Open Access entry. Beall (2016) has also published draft guidelines to help researchers more easily identify predatory conferences, but it is still important to do your homework.

Once you've selected the conference you want to present at, care needs to focus on developing the abstract and paper in a timely manner allowing you the best possible chance of having your paper selected and subsequently presenting with confidence. The title and abstract of the conference paper is also an important consideration. For example, has the research been published previously and if so, is your title and abstract identical? Is the paper for presentation a duplicate of the published paper and do you to intend to include this in conference proceedings? Alternatively, are you considering writing the publication after the conference, if yes, can the title and abstract be the same as the presentation? Should this then be declared in the covering letter to the submitting journal? These are questions that need to be considered to ensure the copyright transfer agreement is not breached. A concise email to the Editor in Chief of the target journal should assist in clarifying these questions and concerns and potential authors need to ensure that here work complies with current guidelines provided by the Committee on Publication Ethics. Sharing conference presentations online may in some

circumstances be considered a previous publication. Again, it is recommended the above steps be checked.

In terms of writing for presentation, there are many excellent papers and books available on preparing and presenting papers at conferences, but briefly to recap. Practice makes perfect, so prepare for the conference well in advance. Considerations include your audience; "who are they, what is their anticipated level of knowledge in the area you are presenting? Is the audience multidisciplinary? How many delegates will there be? What is the focus of the conference?" (Hardicre, Coad, & Devitt, 2007, p. 402) and what are some 'no go' areas to navigate around such as current controversies. The paper needs to be tailored to the interests and needs of the audience. The written presentation should be clear and consist of appropriate language, with short, concise sentences that will fit the audience (Hoffman & Mittelman, 2004). The "take home message," or "so what" factor is also crucial and this needs to be accounted for in the preparation and planning so work can be appropriately showcased (Sawatzky, 2011, p. 38). This should not be as theoretically dense as a written paper, so as to engage and capture the audience.

It is important to know how much time you have to present and prepare accordingly. Research presentations at a conference are usually short—15 to 20 minutes is typical—and grouped together in a concurrent session that may last 60, 75, or 90 minutes. Session moderators will flash cards or lights to let presenters know how much time they have remaining in their session and will stop a presentation when the time is up. We have seen presenters be asked to stop speaking in the middle of a sentence! Therefore, is important to know beforehand how much time you have and practice to make sure you use the time precisely. You might also ask if you will be expected to answer questions within your allotted time, or if all questions will be held to last 5 to 10 minutes of the session.

Whilst public speaking can be unnerving, typical concerns for conference presenters include appearing foolish, forgetting content, and feeling exposed (Silyn-Roberts, 2013). Fueling this anxiety is the fear of a negative evaluation from peers as well being subjected to social scrutiny and this can be a motivator (Hardicre et al., 2007). Engaging the audience therefore is a good opening strategy. After thanking the chairperson, this can be enacted by asking the audience for a quick show of hands on a simple question (Greenhalgh, de Jongste, & Brand, 2011). If humor is used then ensure it is appropriate to the topic, culturally sensitive, conveys a useful educational point, and is politically correct and understood within the context that it is delivered (Greenhalgh et al., 2011).

Whilst Powerpoint presentations are commonly used by speakers at conferences they can also being mind numbingly boring, comprising too many slides with too much information and commonly called "Death by PowerPoint" (see http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-35038429 for tips to avoid death by PowerPoint). Ideally a rule of thumb would be no more 15 slides for a 20 minute presentation; and no more than eight words per line and eight bullet points per slide. If you exceed these limitations then chances are the audience will tune out fairly quickly. Also remember words are not everything. Using photos and cartoons helps to engage the attention of the audience and re-engage them in your presentation if their attention is wandering (see Greenhalgh et al., 2011 for the do's and don'ts for slides; Nicoll & Chinn, 2015 also have some valuable information). If you are presenting at an international conference it is also important not to just introduce yourself but your country—briefly. This helps to give other delegates some perspective about you, your health system and how your research fits in at the local and global level.

To enhance communication and minimize anxiety it is recommended that speakers:

- Project one's voice by speaking loud and clear.

- Avoid the repetitive use of speech such as 'um'.

- Maintain eye contact with the audience so that the audience feels like you are personally speaking to them.

- Be confident, sincere, and enthusiastic to engage the audience.

- Respect your allotted time, and pace your presentation accordingly.

- Be aware of personal habits and behaviors—such as flicking your hair back.

- Thank your hosts, introducers, and organizers at the outset and to give credit during your presentation to collaborators, supporters and sponsors of your work.

(summarised from Greenhalgh et al., 2011; Yalçın & Yalçın, 2010).

Tips to facilitate the final section of your presentation include:

- Be prepared: know your topic in-depth and the related literature.

- Consider and anticipate potential questions that may be asked so you are not taken by surprise.

- Thank audience members that offer questions.

- Pause and make sure you understand the question, and if you do not, ask for further clarification. This provides opportunity to consider potential responses.

- Repeat the question if you think not all audience members have heard it.

- Be honest if you do not know the answer, and thank the person and say that you will investigate, or if appropriate deflect the question back to the audience for answers.

- Do not be afraid to admit to problems, but do so in a positive fashion

- Prepare yourself for no questions, and instead ask a question of the audience such as, "Has anyone here experienced similar issues?"

(summarised from Greenhalgh et al., 2011; Hardicre et al., 2007; Sawatzky, 2011; Silyn-Roberts, 2013)

Following your presentation it is good to stay and interact, and be sure to have some business cards to distribute. This may provide other opportunities for interested conference delegates to obtain further presentation information, share best practices, network and discuss potential opportunities for collaboration (Price, 2010; Ranse & Hayes, 2009). Interactions should also extend beyond your actual presentation and it is important to network during the duration of the conference (Sawatzky, 2011). Skilled networkers take time to work out who is at a conference and approach each of these people in turn, and link to their own contacts (Hardicre et al., 2007). Often delegates may make arrangements to meet with key people at the conference well in advance. This is important given the multiple workshops, research focus groups, or trade shows that may be scheduled during conference breaks. This enables strategic networking and demonstrates that you value other's time and are keen and motivated to make the most of the opportunities attending a conference may afford. This is particularly important for early career researchers as this enables them to extend their connections with key people and may pave the way for future collaborations or career opportunities. When making contact to set up a meeting be sure to identify in a few bullet points for the purpose of the meeting and what specifically you want to discuss. This preparation can help ease both parties into a productive meeting.

Following the conference it is equally important to acknowledge the time and expertise of the people you have met in this way via a thank you email. After all

professional courtesy costs nothing but is the lynchpin of successful networking! If you have obtained funding to attend the conference then it is also important to include in your conference report the people you met and the outcomes of your meetings. In time this may lead to favorable review of your conference funding applications if you are able to demonstrate sustainable outcomes from ongoing collaborations arising from networking activities.

Finally, we need to encourage and support colleagues to conduct research, and present their results at legitimate meetings, seminars and conference as these provide a forum for an array of professional development activities including mentoring (Thompson, Brookins-Fisher, Kerr, & O'Boyle, 2012). It is through role modelling that early career professionals are socialized into the profession and establish authentic networks (Thompson et al., 2012). Conferences provide sound opportunities to network; this is about making new contacts and reestablishing links with long standing colleagues, forging relationships and developing groups of like-minded people with view to formalize a collaborative working arrangement to develop expertise and develop writing programs (Hardicre et al., 2007). Whilst writing for publication is important, so too is writing for presentation at conferences.

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