ECR KE Skills, Workshop 1

Choosing your approach to written/visual communication

Considering some of the options available and how they can best be integrated into a strategic knowledge exchange strategy: leaflets, brochures, blogs, posters, academic websites, briefings and factsheets.

Issues covered in discussion included consideration of resources required, how best to reach a target audience, framing the message and maintaining interest throughout the lifetime of a project.

1. Leaflets

**Strengths**

- Lightweight, portable (an information-rich business card
- Good for advertising/ disseminating/marketing work at conferences
- Useful as hand-out at events helping build personal contact
- Concise; quick way of presenting information to busy people
- Attractive; images can be used to enhance the message and help recognition
- Can be accessible to a broad audience
- Focuses in on key points, headline messages
- Contact details are very important for follow up
- Relatively quick/cheap to produce, can be updated easily

**Weaknesses**

- Not comprehensive, lacks depth
- Danger of over-simplification
- Not a detailed scientific communication, can lack credibility
- Limited audience (unless contact details for further information are followed up)
- Easily lost/ignored

2. Brochures

**Strengths**

- Space to provide as much information as needed for a specific audience
- Can be (easily) tailored to focus on a range of different audiences
- Well-balanced, visually attractive, pleasing format encourages engagement
- Good approach for selling research to a wider audience; promotional, marketing
• Presenting detailed science in an accessible way by drawing attention to key points/messages
• Space for a useful balance of graphics and text etc. to enhance the message
• Useful resource for people to take from events; with contact details, references etc.

**Weaknesses**

• Not peer-reviewed
• Quality/robustness of content can be variable
• Needs careful targeting; could potentially limit audience to non-specialists but can be too long/detailed for a general audience
• Can be expensive to produce in glossy format
• Too much emphasis on ‘selling’ the research which can give the wrong impression

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3. Blogs

**Strengths**

• Freedom to say what you want – can include personal opinions, controversial ideas etc.
• Less formal approach can be appealing
• Manageable reading size
• Instantly available, can reach people quickly; easy available on-line 24/7
• Can be useful as a quick way of instigating change/new ideas
• Can potentially reach a wider audience beyond the usual stakeholders
• Less resource intensive, personal view so no need for collaborative agreements

**Weaknesses**

• Trustworthiness is questionable, no control over accuracy
• Need to consider the length to maintain interest
• Often a very small readership, difficult to target a specific audience; advertising can be challenging
• Could be better for use in certain areas with a broader interest e.g. health
• Accessible by all so need to be aware of how the message may be interpreted by others
• A self-selected group comment on blogs – need to be aware of this
• You need time to find and read good blogs

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4. Posters

**Strengths**

• Visually engaging; attracts immediate attention/interest
• Encourages one to one interaction (if standing next to them) – readers are encouraged to ask questions, can be more effective for engagement than a presentation etc.
• Acts as a prompt for further discussion
• Simple images/graphics can pull in an audience
• Can be stand alone or work well with an accompanying leaflet to take away
• Bite-sized information and contact details for more information

Weaknesses

• How do you make people read them?
• Design is crucial and can be more important than content; small text can lose audience
• Need to be careful not to include too much information - too many words kill the purpose
• Risk of being too simplified for scientific work
• No peer-review or quality control
• Not a quick alternative to a presentation – need different skills to design an effective poster

5. Academic papers

Strengths

• Peer reviewed to guarantee quality; trustworthy
• Well recognised source of detailed information
• Standard disseminate route in the academic field; familiar
• Clearly written for a specific audience
• Helps respond to funders requests for ‘impact’
• Used to develop/publicise personal credibility

Weaknesses

• Can be difficult/costly to get published
• Time consuming both in the publication process and for the audience to read and understand
• Long publishing timescales can mean information is outdated when published
• Pressure to publish as used to evaluate impact (via REF return)
• Often discipline-specific – silos dominate, difficult to publish inter-disciplinary work
• Can be misinterpreted by media
• Not accessible for a wider non-scientific audience (language, costs, access)
• Only reaches a small audience
• Review process can be flawed, credibility of journals varies
• Can be visually disengaging
6. Websites

Strengths

- Lends credibility to research by direct association with a respected research group
- Can provide comprehensive information in an engaging and innovative way
- Instant dissemination of new information in an accessible format
- Can be interactive; useful for communicating visuals and simulations – which can also enhance impact – including videos for a personal touch
- Gives more control to the reader to choose what is relevant
- Free access to (nearly) all; potentially very large audience for work
- Can include numerous links to other information to embed research in the wider landscape/add value
- Can use search engine to gather information quickly

Weaknesses

- Requires time and effort to do properly; there is skill in both writing for the web and designing sites
- Must be kept up-to-date
- Content often re-written by web manager – can miss emphasis or even misrepresent work
- Need to ensure easy to navigate; need training to identify effective search terms
- Passive one-way dissemination of information
- Not always trusted by the public
- Content can be too difficult for many audiences
- Technological glitches occur, compatibility of website browsers etc.
- Quality varies dramatically
- No quality control or peer-review process

7. Briefings

Strengths

- Brief, concise and accessible for policymakers and practitioners
- Can start the debate and drive change
- Gets academic content over to people who tend not to read journals
- Effective use of key points helps focus readers
- Information-rich
- Can give substantial amounts of information/contact details/ references for further information
- Can discover inadvertently (e.g. via a search engine)
- Useful as a step between leaflets and more detailed brochures
- Can target for a specific audience (but assumes you know the audience requirements well)
• Useful approach to updating a particular audience

Weaknesses

• Targeted nature limits audience
• Can be ignored if not attractive in design
• Can be too wordy – images could help illustrate points more clearly
• Need careful use of language – appropriate for policy/practice audience

8. Factsheets

Strengths

• Good mechanism for presenting key findings and important highlights
• Easy to read, accessible, concise overview
• Can be topic/audience specific and/or specifically linked to a research project
• Detailed information but not limited to an academic audience (as for scientific papers)
• Careful use of formatting and images can enhance interest
• There is an expectation of a high level of scientific content
• Level of detail avoids misinterpretation of findings (common with press releases)
• Take-away information – good for use at events
• Good intermediary between leaflets and brochures; updated easily

Weaknesses

• Tedious/boring to read
• Limited audience
• Large and/or bulky – heavy and awkward to carry from events
• Multiple sheets need to be well numbered to avoid confusion
• Infographics would be useful
• Difficult to ensure relevance throughout