Description

After you've spent months and maybe even years on your academic research and now finally have it published, what's next? Will the general public read and understand your research? Will the article sit on someone's shelf and collect dust or will it actually spark interest from the general public? After all, the goal of scientific research is to ultimately provide information and scientific breakthroughs to everyone.

The reality is that academic publishing focuses on specific subjects. Moreover, the general public do not read most journals. Even so, the scientific community aims to find ways to engage the public in its research. This public engagement can encompass several aspects. For example, it can involve a vested interest in a particular research to the point of them becoming involved in fundraising and the dissemination of information.

Here, in this article, we discuss ways that help ensure the general public receives your message.

Perception of the General Public

Some researchers tend to underestimate the general public and consider their research as too complicated for the layperson to understand. This attitude then reflects in how they write their papers as they end up using too many scientific jargons. There might also be too much data making it difficult to find the main point.

As a result of this, researchers limit the dissemination of their discoveries only to a subset of the population. However, this is not the intent of scientific research. We must think in broader terms and engage as much of the public as possible.

Five-Step Plan

Sense About Science strives for openness and honesty in all areas of research. They created a five-step protocol to help researchers provide the public with information on open-heart surgery in children. This was a very sensitive subject and difficult to present. Still, the funding sources wanted to ensure that the public received the information. More and more, funding sources want to know how research findings will benefit the public before they fund your project. The challenge is to ensure that your

research is interesting and understandable.

These five steps created to ensure that the public is engaged in your research are as follows:

1. Scoping: This is just another term for “assessing” the interest in your research. You might turn to social media, blogs, and chatrooms to discuss your project. Through this, you can get a good feel of how much interest is out there in public forums.
2. Involving others: Determine your audience. Look beyond the obvious circle of scientific types and find others who might share an interest in your study. For example, if you conducted a study on reintroducing the Gray wolf into Nebraska, who would be most likely concerned? In this case, it might be livestock farmers. These citizens would most likely be the ones who would attend open meetings and discuss any concerns that they have.
3. Planning: Now that you’ve identified your audience, focus on how to present your findings in ways that they can understand. Use specific language (as stated earlier—not too technical) and format. For example, instead of using only text, involve graphs, charts, and other illustrations. Graphic presentations are always much more interesting than plain text. There are many graphics programs that can help you create powerful illustrations and presentations. So, be sure to take a look at them.
4. User-testing: Your research project should involve the public in at least an advisory capacity. That is, ask for feedback on your findings and how to best present them.
5. Dissemination: At this point, it is likely that those with whom you’ve communicated about your research will continue to show an interest and even help find ways in which to share it with others. Take advantage of this.

So, why should we care whether the public is involved?

Public Engagement is a Necessity

Even though we might not believe that public engagement in our research has any value, many funding sources and institutions encourage researchers to ensure public engagement takes place. With funding not only becoming so important to ongoing research but also more difficult to secure, if these sources insist on public engagement, it is worth your time and effort to ensure that it happens.

The author of a recent article reminds us that the European Commission strongly encourages open research, data, and access. This makes public engagement even more important to both scientific and non-scientific research.

Benefits of Public Engagement

When the public is engaged in scientific output, they reap the benefits of the educational background and research involved. This is important as engaging the public opens the lines of communication. This can also have many positive results, such as shared resources and knowledge with communities, schools, and government agencies. Researchers might also find a larger pool of funding sources and might even pursue additional research on the same subject. Universities might benefit from extra funding as a result of better dissemination of information.

There is quite a bit of misinterpretation of scientific data and active two-way communication between

the public and the researchers help resolve these issues. This is important, especially in areas such as medical research and new treatment for diseases.

For example, the study on public engagement in open-heart surgery research mentioned above greatly affected all those involved from the children themselves to siblings and grandparents. Moreover, misinterpreting this research could result in a host of unnecessary concerns and even panic. Public engagement also helped to design a website that provided very clear information so as to prevent any unnecessary concerns.

Therefore, you are encouraged to adopt a public engagement approach in all your studies. Organizations such as Sense About Science help guide you through this process.

Please answer the following questions in the comment section below. You can use any informational links when warranted.

You are doing research on Sickle Cell Anemia. How would you go about finding informational forums on which to discuss your research and findings? How would you find local communities who would be interested in your research?

Category

1. Promoting Research
2. Using Online Media

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