

# Terence's Stuff: A Toast to Posters!

Terry Speed writes in praise of posters as the best form of communication at conferences and meetings.



When I was first went to conferences I didn't know anyone, couldn't understand the talks, and felt lonely and miserable. These days I know lots of people, and can understand the talks fairly well, but I often still feel lonely and miserable. Why is it so hard to get a conference right?

There are many formats for conferences these days. They can be large or small, general or specialized, have lots or relatively few talks, they can take place in one or many rooms, and be located in a hotel, a conference center or a university. Organization can be professional or voluntary, registration can be high or very high(!), posters may play a negligible or major role, and so on.

Over the years I've found that I prefer small, specialized conferences, with few talks, in one remote location, run by friendly professionals, in which posters play a large role. Indeed I now think the treatment of posters is the single most important aspect of a conference, especially if it is a big one. If the posters are well laid out, with enough space and time allocated to permit people to mill around, look, and discuss all of them if they wish, preferably with a beverage in their hand, without crowding each other too much, then I'll forgive almost anything else at the conference.

What's so great about posters? For a start, they take a bit of work to prepare, but in my experience this is usually well done. I'd say the average poster receives more preparation than the average 15 minute talk involving transparencies, PDFs or PowerPoint. Careful preparation is good for

us, the viewers or listeners. Many posters display extreme levels of care, attention to detail and artistry, which is pretty rare with oral presentations.

Secondly, we get the condensed version of whatever it's all about. I once heard that some U.S. president (was it Reagan?) required every policy issue, no matter how complicated, to be reduced to text on a single sheet of paper (presumably he had a minimum font size, too). I sympathize strongly with that approach, though I'm prepared to allow the sheet of paper to be poster-sized, not just A4 or 8.5x11. The need for brevity concentrates the mind, though I'll be the first to concede that not every poster creator meets the challenge. Thirdly, we can survey a wide variety of research without having to make tough choices. A leisurely stroll, sipping the beverage as we go, really does beat running around madly trying to catch the talks we want to hear, embedded in parallel (and often clashing) sessions all over the place...

Fourthly, we can talk to the presenter if we want to, which is terrific. We can say, "Great poster!" and move quickly on, or we can say "Did you cover the case where  $n > p$ ?" Either way, we have made the poster creator's day. Spreading happiness in 15 minute talks is much harder. Few of us have the courage to raise our hand in the one minute devoted to discussion and say "Great talk! Did you cover the case  $n$

$> p$ ?" and if we did, we'd never hear the answer as the room rapidly and noisily empties. If we wish, we can just walk by without comment, something which can usually be achieved (provided the space is sufficient) by keeping our distance and adopting a "just looking, not buying" look. This is where having adequate space is critical. If things are crowded and the poster's creator is waiting expectantly, and makes eye contact, we have no choice but to feign business elsewhere and move quickly on, or make some comment. "Nice poster!" usually works, but many of us only want to say that when we mean it. Posters are somewhat confrontational, but so is human communication.

Finally, a good series of poster sessions can give researchers young and old far more exposure than can ever be achieved in 15 minute talks in multiple parallel sessions, even assuming those interested in a given talk could find their way to the room in time.

In areas such as human genetics, psychiatry, cancer or heart disease, where conference attendance is in the tens of thousands, posters are the only way so many members can contribute. Not even the largest conference center can provide rooms for 200 parallel sessions. Must we wait until our numbers reach these magnitudes before we in Statistics embrace posters as our basic form of conference communication?

*Posters are "the single most important aspect of a conference", according to Terry Speed, especially at the bigger ones. So get talking with the presenters, tell them what you like about their poster, ask questions. Use it as an opportunity to learn, to network, and even to make new friends.*

