

Brenda Hazard

# Poster session alphabet soup

## A recipe for success

**P**oster sessions are frequently on the menu at professional conferences and meetings. They offer an opportunity to share an idea, a solution, an experiment (successful or failed), or a discovery. Poster sessions tell a short visual story and include an oft-repeated, brief presentation (5–10 minutes), accompanying materials, and informal Q&A during a designated hour. Poster sessions are an effective way to take an active role in professional meetings and to connect with colleagues with similar interests.

Poster session proposals for the ACRL 13th National Conference in Baltimore are due October 20, 2006. Proposals are peer-reviewed; roughly half to two-thirds of the submissions are accepted for presentation. If a national conference exceeds your appetite, local, regional, and statewide professional meetings are a great way to get started—and competition is less intense. Other opportunities for poster sessions include campus events (parent fairs, orientations for new faculty or students, campus service open houses) where library services can be showcased. User group meetings often include poster sessions and are good venues for highly specific topics. Scientific meetings are frequently overlooked but offer another opportunity especially in collaboration with a colleague from a specific academic discipline. Informational and instructional technology conferences are additional venues where the library perspective is a natural accompaniment.

Like many dishes, poster sessions can be prepared in a variety of formats: based on the scientific method (hypothesis, methodology, results, discussion); as step-by-step

procedures or practice; as literature reviews; or as purely graphic displays (photographs, screen shots, Web page details). The flexibility of the poster session invites creativity. Accompanying computer demonstrations can spice up or embellish the poster. Attendees frequently enjoy the practical aspect and the solutions offered in the poster session format. Handouts disappear quickly as attendees take a quick taste of the concept offered and digest the details later.

Below are tips from A to Z that combine to create a successful poster session experience.

Adhere to submission guidelines including deadline, word count, title, abstract, and other required elements.

Bring business cards, single- and double-sided tape, tacks, pens, markers, and other supplies.

Consider adding some props that add three-dimensionality: clear acrylic literature holders to display your handout, balloons, candy dish or basket, or a giveaway related to your poster content.

Dress professionally even if poster sessions have an informal flavor. It is a professional presentation. You may be making a first impression on a future employer. Someone may be scouting you out as a potential employee based on your innovative ideas.

Encourage active participation by asking questions of your audience. Include your plans to engage the audience in your pro-

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posal. Give attendees an opportunity to write quick comments or to leave a business card.

Float a fresh idea or emerging research topic to determine if it is interesting to others. Poster sessions can be the start of more thorough, published research.

Give yourself plenty of time to create your poster. You will need to create graphics, experiment with text format, print other visuals, and lay out all the elements. Don't affix anything to the board until you have everything arranged.

Hand out your business card and encourage feedback and questions. If you receive follow-up contact, be certain to respond.

Invest in a portfolio case costing less than \$20. It is a carry-on travel item and protects your display from wind and weather while in transit.

Jazz up your poster with a snappy title. Tie it in with the conference theme.

Keep it simple. The poster is just a taste! Don't overcrowd your display.

Leave details in handouts or use your handout to provide the URL to a Web site with more thorough results, discussion, illustrations, or examples.

Make it clear to reviewers through your well-prepared proposal (checked for spelling and grammar) that your poster will be professional and add to the value of the entire conference for participants.

Negotiate a safe place for personal belongings. Secure storage is often unavailable. Have a plan to store your wallet, briefcase, luggage, or other belongings during your poster session.

Offer the main points of your session in a five-minute description, and plan to repeat it often. Attendees often plan to visit many

concurrent sessions, so avoid monopolizing their time.

Pick some trusted colleagues and ask for honest feedback about your poster layout.

Quell your fears of public speaking by trying a poster presentation. The audience is generally small and the duration short, but you will get practice thinking and talking on your feet.

Read the guidelines regarding size and space that will be allotted to you, but be prepared if the actual setup is different.

Smile and greet conference passersby. Invite them to stop and hear more about your idea or project. Ask them a question first to encourage active listening. Be approachable and inviting.

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Use an active voice in your proposal language. Emphasize engagement. Define learning outcomes: *learn, discover, identify, share,* and *describe* are good action words.

Visit other poster sessions or conference Web sites for ideas on topics, layout, and execution.

Wear comfortable shoes. You may be on your feet for two hours to set up, deliver, and remove your poster session.

Xerox your handouts before leaving home. Copy services at conferences can be very expensive. It's worth the extra pound in your luggage. Extra copies can often be left on tables at the conference.

Yield returns on your effort by converting your poster session into a professional publication.

Zero in on calls for participation from conference organizers. Collaborate with a colleague outside your usual area of specialty; poster proposals offering different perspectives are often welcome. Think objectively about your work—there is probably something you are doing that is suitable for a poster session! *zz*