Making the Most of Your Poster Presentation (1): Poster Design

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In our previous article entitled ‘Keys to Presenting Orally with Success at International Conferences’, we introduced ways to give good oral presentations using PowerPoint slides. Another significant way of presenting at international conferences is through poster presentations. The impact of your poster presentation will depend mainly on how well it is designed, and how well you organize and arrange the content of your presentation. Here, we focus on effective ways to design and plan the layout of your poster.

Designing your poster

Giving poster presentations is somewhat like fishing. You need to catch as many fish as you can with one rod. When you give poster presentations, making sure that your poster catches the attention and interest of many viewers, is probably as important as what is presented in the content. In that sense, the poster is not only a presentation in and of itself, but a baiting method to catch and generate the interest of the viewers who are then able to engage in dialogue with you as the poster presenter. In order to do this, you will need to design your poster in a way that is eye-catching, readable, and attractive. However, it is crucial that you first follow the instructions given to you, and know the exact dimensions, or size, of your poster in addition to how it will be displayed at the conference site.

Arranging the layout

Although some authors choose to use 2, 3 or 4 columns for a poster, using 3 columns usually creates a good balance. However this depends on the actual dimensions of your poster; if the poster is larger than the average size, or contains more data, it may be possible to have 4 columns. Fig. 1 is an example layout of a poster using 3 columns. Generally it is said that a reader’s attention travels diagonally, from top to bottom, and from left to right. Therefore it is suitable to arrange the sections in a logical sequence, starting from the top, using columns. Note how the Results...
section, or the most important points of your presentation, is placed in the center of the poster where the reader will likely see the most. This is the area of “prime real estate”.

**Selecting the right font and type size**

Since the reader will be standing 1-2 meters away from the poster, the title should be large enough to read (72 point) and should consist of both upper and lower case letters (avoid all capitals as they are actually difficult to read) so that it is immediately comprehensible. The title should be no longer than 2 lines at most, in order to maintain the appropriate type size. Usually for poster presentations, and slide presentations as well, fonts such as Arial or Helvetica, known as sans serif fonts for their simplicity, are recommended. Remember that if there are several people standing at your poster, or if the viewer has bifocal or trifocal spectacles, the top part of the poster is easiest to see.

The author name(s) and affiliation(s) should be placed under the title using a font slightly smaller than the title itself (24-28 point). The type size becomes extremely important because unless the audience can easily see and read what is being presented, they will probably lose interest and not stay to listen to your presentation, or read the poster. You should also remember to consider the overall balance of your poster and select fonts that look suitable together if you choose, as is usually the case, to use different ones for subheadings.

**Use of color**

The important rule is to catch the eye of the reader without overdoing it. Of course the use of color and other graphics is effective. However, you should be careful that it does not become too flashy as it can easily work to distract the attention of the audience rather than attracting it. For example, a poster that uses too much fluorescent color, too many different colors in one section, or colors that contrast with each other so much that it becomes difficult to see what is written, should be avoided.

**Closing message**

Contrary to oral presentations at international conferences where the presenter stands in front of the entire audience, poster sessions are given in rooms where many posters are set up simultaneously and readers can walk about in the room and move from one poster to the next. For this reason, posters must be well-designed so that they capture the reader’s attention and appeal to them. One thing to keep in mind is that while you may present all information of your study in a research paper, you will be presenting only the most important information in a limited space for a poster presentation. Our next instalment will describe details of poster presentations, alternative layouts and how to provide materials that will not contravene duplicate publication rules.

**References**

1) Kojima T, Barron JP. Keys to Presenting Orally with Success at International Conferences. 日本消化器外科学会雑誌. 2015;48(11):961-2.