

How do I engage adult audiences?

*This guide covers how to design engagement activities for adult only audiences. It's a good idea to have a specific adult audience in mind before reading this resource. To help you narrow your target audience you might want to read our resources on **how to choose an audience to engage with** and **how to design hands-on activities**.*

1 | Why is it important to engage adult audiences?

Losing touch with science in adult life

It is easy to lose touch with science in adult life. Many adults leave formal STEM learning after GCSE level and it can be hard to stay up to date at the rate science progresses.

Meaningful two-way engagement

Talking to adult audiences often offers more opportunity for discussion, debate and dialogue about your research. Meaningful conversations can broaden out you; can go from just talking about how the 'science works' to its wider impacts on society, policy implications, economic importance and cultural relevance.

Collecting public comment and opinion on your work

The opportunity for meaningful two-way engagement gives the potential for you to collect public comment and opinion on your work, which can help you think about your research and its relevance to society in new ways.

2 | Motivations and barriers to engaging with adults

When designing your activity, think about how you can remove any barriers an adult might have to engaging with your work, whilst at the same time appealing to their motivations. As a fellow adult what would motivate you to attend an engagement event / activity in your free time?

Informal learning

Although all ages respond well to informal learning, this is especially true for adults. Informal learning environments allow for a more flexible, creative and entertaining approach to engagement which are enjoyable to design and deliver.

Embedding science in wider culture

By creating engagement activities that adults want to participate in during their free time we are helping to embed science into wider culture, promoting science events as a creative, entertaining and enjoyable way to spend leisure time.



Barriers

Time	<p>You are normally left with after-work and weekend hours for engagement, which means you should aim to make your offering align with those timings and make it something your target audience would want to do in their leisure time. Some adults will have care responsibilities. If you want to engage parents with young children, this might alter the ideal timings of your activity. You may also want to think about how their children could come along and engage too. For more on this, see our resource: <i>How can I engage families?</i></p>
Science knowledge and interest	<p>Not all adults will feel that they have enough science knowledge to participate in meaningful conversation with researchers. Or they might feel science isn't "for" them and think they are uninterested in science topics. In these cases, think about their other interests and values and how to align your activity to appeal to them. Perhaps you can collaborate with an artist or a community group?</p>
Finance	<p>For some adult audiences, paid-for events create a barrier to engagement. However sometimes a ticket price can help to signal that your activity will be a high-quality experience. Keep your target audience in mind in all decisions you make. If you do decide to charge, this may affect the types of audience you attract and the attitudes they come with: "Am I going to get my money's worth from this experience?" Alternatively, you may be seeking an in-depth contribution to your research, where your audiences attend multiple sessions or workshops that help define research questions and aims for example. For this form of engagement, you may want to consider paying attendees for their time.</p>
Hard to reach	<p>It can be tricky to cut through all the other media and events that adults are bombarded with daily. Think about what makes your activity unique / stand out and make this a key focus of your marketing. You'll also want to consider the communications platforms you use. If your target audience are elderly, an Instagram post might not be the best way to promote your activity to them. Is there an organisation that already has links with this group who could help promote your activity? E.g. Age UK or a local care home.</p>
Knowing what to expect	<p>'Aren't science activities for kids?' A lot of science engagement is aimed at children. Be very clear that your activity is for adults and think carefully about how to convey this in marketing copy and design. For example, if using photos in you marketing, ensure they are photos of adults. When writing copy, you can still be fun and engaging! Why not check out some of our Imperial Lates descriptions?</p>



Motivations

Self-betterment	Attending a science event or activity presents an opportunity to learn, improve understanding and broaden horizons.
Content that addresses personal experiences	To understand how science might affect them personally (e.g. a diabetic person interested in the latest diabetes research), how science might find answers to their questions or to help make the case for issues people want to raise awareness of. For example, engaging with local communities in White City about pollution from the flyover.
Interesting content	To find out about science that is cutting edge, intellectually stimulating, has fascination value, and / or is relevant to daily life.
Identity building	The activities that a person chooses to do during their spare time is an active way of shaping their identity. Thinking about how your audience identify (are they 'science people', 'art people', or are they interested in attending a range of cultural events?) will help you to tailor your approach.
Social experiences	Looking for something to do with friends, or the opportunity to meet other likeminded people and make new connections, could motivate an adult audience to attend your event / activity.

3 | What works well?

Opportunity for discussion, dialogue and debate

Opportunities to talk to or hear directly from researchers can be a rare occurrence for people. These conversations work best when you have thought-provoking content that is relevant to daily life or things that people can relate to and discuss. Take a look at our resource: *How do I have effective dialogue with the public?*

Art-science collaborations, creativity and play

Interactive elements that include arts, crafts, games and play are not just tools used to engage younger audiences. Done well, they are also highly valued by adult audiences. They create a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere, which breaks the ice, encourages conversation, and helps to remove the expert-audience dynamic (which can be a barrier to engagement). Activities like these also offer the opportunity for your audience to make something to take away, which adds value to the experience. Read our resource *How do I engage through games and play?*

Levels of engagement

Not everyone will want to throw themselves into a participatory, hands-on, multisensory experience. Try to design your activity to be flexible, with optional levels of engagement. You might have a simple demo or interesting images for those who just want to look, a quiet space for those who would like to have informal conversations with researchers, and a participatory experience for those who feel like getting more involved. Designing your activity with multiple levels of engagement helps you to develop something that is flexible and modular, so it can be re-used in different ways for future audiences.



Social experiences and relationship-building

Think about developing an activity that can be attended with friends, or that provides an opportunity for attendees to meet and chat to new people. This also includes meeting and building relationships with the researchers, which is highly valued in any engagement. Think how you will design and arrange your space to encourage social interaction, this could be as simple as a food and drink offering, a demo with a wow-moment to get people talking, or you could think about including comedy, performance, or food and drinks.

Story and narrative

Can you centre your activity around a story or narrative that will create a journey for your audience? Thinking about beginnings, middles and endings can help you to build a structure and design a constructive and rewarding experience.

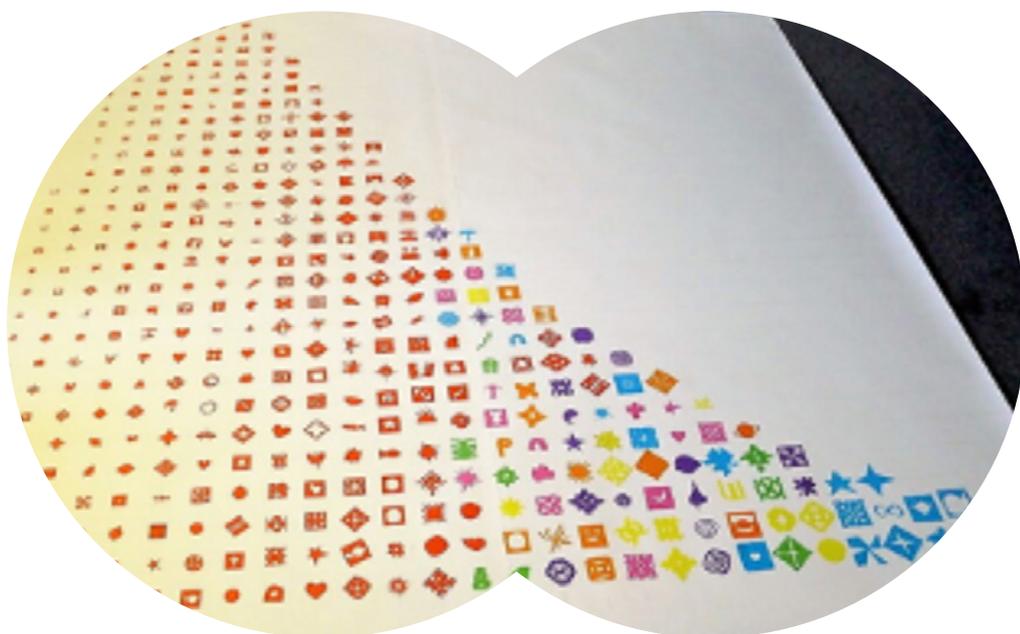
Once you've considered the above, some helpful question to ask yourself could be:

- What sort of conversations would I like to have with an adult public audience?
- What would I like the audience to take away from this interaction afterwards?
- What picture of my research would I like to portray?
- How do I want my visitors or participants to feel?
- How do I want them to act?
- What environment would I like to create to illicit these pictures, feelings and actions?

Case study: Matisse Sunlight

What is it?

Researchers from the Centre for Cold Matter worked with artist, Geraldine Thomas, to produce a piece of art (Matisse Sunlight) featuring contributions from Imperial Lates attendees in 2019. The artwork was a giant collage inspired by Matisse's cut-outs and the spectrum of sunlight. The activity involved Lates attendees cutting coloured squares into shapes that make them think of the sun.



Why is it a good example?

Bringing art into science engagement is great way to reach adults who wouldn't usually gravitate towards science events and activities. It helps show that science is for everyone. This activity was drop-in which meant attendees could get as involved as they liked, cutting as many or as few pieces of card as they wanted. The researchers and the artist were also on hand, cutting out their own pieces and available for informal conversation. This encouraged the adult attendees to get involved (adults like to gravitate towards groups!) and they could have informal chats with the scientists to hear, and ask questions about, the science behind the artwork they were contributing to. The piece was built up throughout the event which resulted in early participants coming back to see how it was coming together showing a sense of investment in the piece and therefore strengthening the memory of the overall experience and of the science itself.

Further reading – Let us know of others!

Matisse Sunlight:

<https://www.findingpatterns.info/journalblog/2019/12/11/matisse-sunlight>