

Tip Sheet 10

Influencing at conferences and other events

Attending conferences and educational events can sometimes feel like a waste of effort – so many people to reach, so many others trying to reach them too - but ask yourself the following:

- Will there be people there that we want to influence/inform?
- Is there a good chance of interacting with them, either in discussion sessions or through organising a side event or through running a stall/stand?
- Do we have, or can we easily make, suitable information or promotional materials to distribute?

There are several ways of making an impact, depending on your numbers and finances.

- **Asking a question in a session.** This can feel like a drop in the ocean, but a good, brief, well-worded question can challenge assumptions, show fresh thinking and gather allies. But make sure you know what you want to say and don't try and make a long speech; it will just annoy people.
- **Organising a “fringe” or side meeting.** This can be expensive as you have to make it an attractive prospect with refreshments, good speakers, etc. If there is competition from other events, it may also only attract those who already agree with you. However, if you can get the Minister to agree to speak at your event, or someone else both useful and important e.g. from WHO, UNAIDS, or a key funder, it may give you private time with them before the speeches, or enable you to brief them more thoroughly on the subject. Make sure it is somewhere easy for event attendees to get to, at a time they will be free, and that you only have short speeches to let people ask questions – you never know who may be in the audience. If you have a supportive celebrity, this may be the place to use them to attract an audience.
- **Taking a stand,** if there is an exhibition area. This can also be expensive and will take organising, making the stand attractive and then staffing it with people who can promote your issue effectively. The two biggest errors that people make are stuffing a stand with too many different things, and failing to make the effort to engage passersby. You must be prepared to be “salespeople” for your cause, actively encouraging chats with anyone passing. However, if there are a large number of people at the event that you'd like to be more informed, plus people that you would like to make relationships with who can influence for you, this is a good option. There are lots of ways of engaging people as they pass by – see the following.
- **Distributing promotional materials for your campaign,** like stickers or leaflets. If you cannot afford the strategies above, just one or two people attending and offering stickers and leaflets may be an option – but always make sure that the organisers do not object; getting thrown out of an event (unless you are trying to make a fuss any way that you can) is not a good look for influencing.

How to engage people in your issue

- Have a gimmick or a game on a stand: a short quiz (with a winners board) brings out people's competitive instincts while also educating them on your issue and getting them talking.
- Have little giveaways: a condom for doing the quiz, a pen with your issue on the side, a small badge with a slogan on. They will be something to remember you by and pass on your name or slogan to others who see them.
- Sticker people early on: if you have a sticker drawing attention to your issue, people wearing it will draw others to your stand or meeting. If you can, make your slogan fit the event – for example, “Ready To Be Tested” promotes HIV testing, but is also popular with political parties expecting to fight an election shortly.
- Offer photographs to people with your campaign placard and put them on social media: this both promotes your cause and is publicity for them.
- If you have a choice of where your stand is, make it somewhere with “traffic flow”, near a coffee stand or by a door people will have to use (and that includes the toilets, but catch them on the way out).

Tricks for doing things cheaply

- Always ask for free places or scholarships if you are a charity or NGO; this is much harder in some Eastern European countries where NGOs are regarded with suspicion, but is always worth asking
- Ask for donations of promotional material and condoms: many companies are happy to let you also promote their products, from a sample HIV self-testing kit for demonstration purposes to free condoms. You can get free copies of many of the international “best practice” or guidance documents. If a pharma company is also attending the event, they may be willing to transport your goods/stand with theirs for free. It never hurts to ask.
- If you don't have posters to put up on your stand, and you know the audience will not be mostly hostile, ask attendees to make comments about your campaign on brightly coloured cards and decorate your stand walls with them. This shows you have support and encourages others to step forward. You can combine this with the photograph idea above, showing people holding up their card.
- If you don't think people would come to a side meeting about HIV, don't waste your money and time. Go to other side meetings about health or other related policy issues at the event – and ask an appropriate question from the audience about HIV. You will reach people who would not normally pay attention to your cause.
- If you can't afford to attend the event, or you are not allowed to, see if you can stand outside and hand out leaflets to people entering. Often, they will take leaflets in passing without looking closely and then, when the speeches get boring, they will read them for lack of anything better to do. In this way you can often get people who would not normally support you to read for much longer than they would otherwise – but don't make the headline too sensational or obvious, or they will refuse the leaflet.

How to Cite:

Power, L. (2017). *OptTEST Tip sheet 10 – Influencing at conferences and other events*. Retrieved from: www.opttest.eu