

**Events as science communication tool:  
The importance of exhilaration, involvement, and interaction**

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**Abstract**

Events are perceived as an effective means to attract people and initiate high levels of interactivity (Whelan & Wohlfeil, 2006). Nolin, Bragesjo and Kasperowski (2006) noted that science weeks and festivals are recent initiatives in the PUS landscape. Science events themselves are not new, the “newness” relates primarily to how the events are organized. Drawing from literature on marketing and science communication, results of a preliminary student research project, and experience in organizing “new style” science events, this paper will elaborate on the importance of science-image, event-image, and self-image congruence. As Keller (1993) indicated, science communication traditionally focuses on meeting cognitive needs, this cognitive part is composed of awareness and image. Branding in general, and event-marketing in this case specifically, may serve both

purposes more effectively than some other modes of communication. Stepping into the footsteps of the global brands, the authors want to discuss the possibilities for using similar strategies for event marketing in science communication contexts, while paying mind to lessons learned about the importance of congruence. The authors have been involved as researchers and/or organizers in national and international science events and festivals (e.g. the BioPOP festival in Italy and the Netherlands; and the Discovery Festival in the Netherlands, part of European Researchers Night).

Science weeks and festivals are recent initiatives in the PUS landscape (Nolin, Bragesjo, & Kasperowski, 2006). Science events in itself are not new – the *wetenweek* in The Netherlands, for example, has already seen its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary – therefore, the “recentness” seems to refer more to characteristics of the initiative (e.g., higher levels of interactivity) than to the existence of the initiatives themselves. This change is of little surprise. With the diversification of public needs, marketers have needed to change their marketing activities and corporate sponsorship and event-marketing have emerged as new means to achieve commercial objectives (Sirgy et al., 2007; Whelan & Wholfeil, 2006).

Although events are not always cost effective, the importance of such activities and their impact on (brand) attitude, preference, satisfaction and loyalty is widely accepted (e.g., Close et al., 2006). Most science communication aims for similar impacts: to improve public interest, awareness, understanding, and enthusiasm for science (see Martín-Sempere, Garzón-García, & Rey-Rocha, 2008; The Royal Society, 2006; Watermeyer, 2012). In this light, science events may be a good way to reengage the younger generation with science. But in order to make science events work, there needs to be a good match between science image and event image and visitor’s expectations.

### **Branding, events and image congruence**

Branding is all about creating relations between a company, its products, and the customer in which the fulfillment in customer expectations and satisfactions (Bridson & Evans, 2004; Kapferer, 2012). And it is the interactive characteristic of event-marketing

that enables active engagement on a behavioral level, which in turn can result in an emotional attachment to a brand (Whelan & Wohlfeil, 2006). For this to work, a company's identity must match its image.

In science communication contexts there is also an intimate connection between identity and image. However, organizational identities should not be understood as singular and well-defined (Horst, 2013). While leaders may try to present a clear picture of one identity, there are always subcultures and an endless variation of identity constructions. So, identity is to be perceived as mutable (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Science communication would benefit from a strategy with a list of values/labels that can be used as a template for branding activities. These could then be used for research on visitor characteristics and expectancies, and for communicating event identity in order to better address an intended audience (targeting).

However, this may solve the congruency problem.

Event effects are dependent on the encoding and retrieval processes of event information. People will process this by matching visual and contextual cues from the event (about science) to existing knowledge structures (of science, the event, or both). These knowledge structures (schemas) effect (learning) environments. So, existing knowledge and earlier experience will frame visitor's judgment of new events and the information communicated at these new events will be either assimilated into existing knowledge structures, or create new evaluations (Chien et al., 2005). However, establishing how this type of information processing and/or elaboration occurs during and/or after event visits is difficult.

Many publications in science communication have shown that the image of science – or, to reference Falk, Randol and Dierking (2011) more precisely, attitudes toward, and understandings of science – are also shaped by an individual's direct personal experiences, needs, expectations, and culture, as well as formal education. We know that when an established image of science (determining, at least to some extent, a visitor's expectancy of that event when communicated as a science event) does not match the image of the event, there is an unbalance that leaves visitors with the feeling of being disappointed.

When a visitor's expectancy is based on existing stereotypes about science (e.g., white coats, elderly men, lab settings), it may not be in congruence with science event characteristics (e.g., loud music, young (science) students, disco setting). As indicated, this may hamper the desired transference of the positive event characteristics to the image of science. So, a better understanding of existing images of science seems important.

### **Aiming to fit the “brand” with the event**

Gwinner and Eaton (1999) found that image transfer is more pronounced when the match between the event and the product can be made stronger. The authors of this paper propose to investigate this relation between event image and science image systematically in science communication contexts.

### **A preliminary study**

#### *Quantitative indications*

A first quick scan to investigate visitor-expectations was performed at The Hague University to test some of the measurement instruments to be used for later studies. This survey was designed by students in the track International Communication Management at the Academy of European Studies and Communication Management as part of their research course and conducted among 100 applied sciences students aged between 17 and 22 years old at this university. Data was collected during a two-day period in December 2013.

The quick scan showed that more than half of the students are generally interested in science (67%) and that Earth Science (35%) and Health Sciences (32%) are considered to be the most interesting fields in science.

91% of the respondents indicated to have never previously visited a science event. 75% of the students who indicated to be generally interested in science, indicated that they thought science events are a good way to make science more interesting for them. Only 33% of the students who indicated not to be generally interested in science indicated that science events would make it more interesting for them.

According to students (66%) the main aim of science events should be to educate and only 14% indicated that the main goal should be to entertain (!). Students seem

somewhat ambiguous about how important it is to attend science events (36% gave a neutral answer), with 29% indicating it is somewhat relevant (or important).

### **Qualitative indications**

In order to gain some insights into event-characteristics qualitative interviews were conducted with organizers of most well-established Dutch science events. The event names are *Discovery Festival*, *Art & Science Night Groningen*, *STRP Festival*, *Lowlands University*, *World Science Festival Amsterdam*, and *UvA University Day*. The structure for each interview has been the same; a framework of themes and evaluations was used. Interviewees were approached by telephone or e-mail. Two festivals were selected for this paper: one festival organized by a scientific institution and one festival organized by a non-scientific institution.

### **The Discovery Festival**

The age range of visitors of the Discovery Festival is quite limited (18-35 years old). The organization aims to attract early adopters, people who are eager for innovations and developments, fairly high educated, but not necessarily with a science background. According to the organizers, about half of the visitors have a science education background and half do not. This is their primary target audience. A secondary target audience are media. The aim is to communicate the message that science is (also) for young people and that is (or can be) trendy and contemporary. Informing their target audience about science (knowledge transfer) is certainly not the main aim of this event. Exhilaration, attraction, and the desire to become involved are the main elements of which they hope will result in a more positive image of science. However, they also think the event meets the cognitive needs of attendees, of people who are (already) curious and want to learn. Essential for the festival, all elements of Discovery must be linked to science and have to offer a certain level of interaction. Real science is at the core of the Discovery Festival. Although it is presented in many different forms, the organizers think people need a certain level of information processing to make sense of the activities, but not to an extent where an academic background is necessary. There are presentations at the Discovery Festival. These key note speakers are selected based on their expertise in

communication – they must be able to connect and to show enthusiasm and act out-going. The Discovery Festival is frequently evaluated and key findings are that visitors are enthusiastic before visiting the event (expectations). This enthusiasm is increased significantly during the event (congruence). Moreover, also did the cognitive part. Measurements showed that comprehensibility of certain scientific matters was improved during the visit.

### **University Day**

University Day is a yearly event for alumni of the University of Amsterdam (UvA). All sorts of activities are organized, from lectures to city tours. The age range for University Day is extremely wide (4-90 years old). The organizers aim to organize activities for all ages. However, the primary target audience consists of alumni, employees of the university, and relatives and offspring of this group, as well as sponsors. For all visitors the day must be varied in activities, so the organization mingles true science with entertainment (recreational activities). Lectures are provided by academics (employees of this university). Lecturers are mostly key figures within the university, but also well-known public figures from outside the university. As a true branding activity, a primary aim of this event is to create new or revitalize existing relationships by letting them enjoy science. However, the organization is clear about the fact that its purposes are not entirely altruistic: they also hope these relationships will foster sponsorship. Overall objective of the event is to stimulate commitment towards the host, the University of Amsterdam. The event will be organized in 2014 for the thirteenth time.

### **Conclusion**

Derived from our theoretical framework and preliminary scans, science events seem a suitable means to brand science in a positive way. But first of all, we should determine a mutual brand-image for science and come to a common branding strategy with a vision, mission and values that can be an overall format to check if the event fits in this agreed structure. There seems to be interest in science in general among the younger public, although, admittedly, this group had not previously visited science events. This

could be interpreted as a lack of interest in such events, but it could also indicate that organizers need to work on their marketing communication techniques. Also, in this preliminary research there are some indications that congruence indeed facilitates image transfer. However, both examples may be predominated by a bias in their visitor characteristics (generally high educated, for example). Further research is necessary to explore how to attract people who are not interested in science to science events, as well as what public responses are to science events at festivals that do not have this science-origin or –focus.

Pre-event research would enable organizers to target their communication more directly at their intended target audience in a way that matches the expectations about the event of this audience. Moreover, a visitor's expectancy that an event will meet his or her cognitive, affective and/or connative needs will prompt behavior (e.g., buying a ticket and actually attending the event). Also, the science communication network should aim at developing (1) a common branding strategy (mission, vision, and core value and labels to be used by event organizers) and (2) using visitor expectancies about an event (e.g., interviewing potential visitors about their expectancies when presenting the idea and main goal of the event) for communication (marketing) and organization (design) purposes.

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