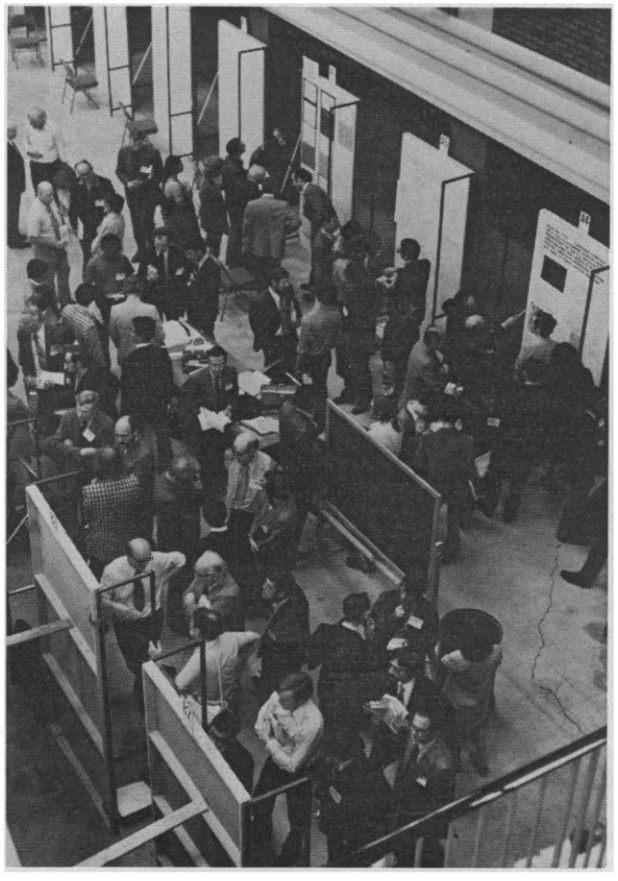
Speaking of Science

Poster Sessions: A New Look at Scientific Meetings

The format of most large scientific meetings leaves much to be desired. Many disparate elements conspire to hinder effective communication between a speaker and his audience. The typical paper is usually about 10 minutes long and is filled with only partially intelligible jargon; it is often read in a wavering monotone by a nervous graduate student or postdoctoral fellow who has never presented a paper before. A small amount of time may be allotted for questions, but often it is wasted by speakers whose presentations last too long. Most meeting rooms are so large, moreover, that questions and answers are unintelligible to large segments of the audience. Meeting attendees have long argued that there must be a better way to present papers, and now it appears that there is.

The better way is the poster session and the concept is deceptively simple. One large meeting room (or more) is filled with bulletin boards on which the participants place graphs, diagrams, data, pictures, and a small amount of text to illustrate the main points of their presentation. The participants then remain with the display for a set period—generally 1 to 1½ hours—to expand on the material and answer questions. Visitors to the sessions can either wander through as in a museum or go directly to the papers that interest them.



Poster sessions, pioneered in Europe, made their first appearance at a major U.S. meeting in Minneapolis earlier this month at the Biochemistry/Biophysics 1974 Meeting, cosponsored by the American Society of Biological Chemists and the Biophysical Society. The sessions were adopted at the joint meeting in part because of an overflow of papers; not enough rooms were available to handle all the submitted papers if they were presented in the conventional manner. Authors of papers were asked, when they submitted abstracts, whether they would like to make their presentations in a poster session, were opposed to it, or were indifferent. Only those who were not opposed to the idea were selected for the poster sessions. Some 500 of the 2200 papers at the week-long meeting were ultimately presented at the sessions.

The authors of papers presented at poster sessions and those who attended the sessions were nearly unanimous in praise of the concept. Perhaps the most frequently cited advantage of the sessions was that they allowed more time for the authors to present the subject matter to those really interested and more time for those interested to digest the material—even to copy data or other information. Most authors suggested that they were more comfortable in the smaller groups than in presenting a formal paper; many said they were especially pleased by the more personal interaction with the listeners and the possibility for a two-way exchange of information. Some of the visitors also pointed out that the sessions gave them a chance to ask questions that they would hesitate to ask in a large group. Others noted that the poster sessions gave them an opportunity to discuss specific aspects of papers—such as experimental techniques—in greater detail than would be possible in a formal presentation. About the only criticism voiced at the sessions was that authors were not able to listen to other presentations at the same session.

Nearly all the authors queried by *Science* indicated that they would like to present future papers in poster sessions. Several conference attendees who said they had initially been opposed to the sessions suggested that they had had second thoughts after visiting the sessions and would also like to present future papers in that fashion. Conference officials were also pleased with the results. The Federation of American Societies of Experimental Biology, which was one of the conference organizers, already has plans for poster sessions at the annual FASEB meeting next spring. Other groups seem likely to follow suit. It is beginning to look as though the poster session is an idea whose time has definitely come.

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