Abstract Presentations

What Do SGIM Presenters Prefer?

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We surveyed physicians presenting abstracts at the 1995 Society of General Internal Medicine annual meeting to determine whether the oral or poster format better achieved their presentation goals. Poster presentations better met respondents' objectives for feedback and criticism and for networking and developing collaborative projects, while oral presentations better met their objectives for national visibility and sharing knowledge within one's field. Sixty-nine percent of respondents preferred to present oral abstracts. The majority of these presenters preferred to present their research in an oral format although poster presentations still played an important role for them, particularly as a venue for feedback on their work. As meeting size increases, different presentation formats should be explored that best meet the needs of the academic community.

KEY WORDS: Society of General Internal Medicine (SGIM); scientific meetings; research abstracts; poster presentations; oral presentations.

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Research presentations at scientific meetings provide an opportunity for researchers to share their work with the scientific community and develop recognition in their area of study. Traditionally, there are two formats for presenting research findings: oral and poster presentations. The oral presentation is a 10-minute verbal description of a study followed by a few minutes for questions. In poster presentations a self-explanatory description is provided on poster board and an author is available for questions.

Presenters' goals for presentation have not been studied. We undertook this study first, to understand presenters' objectives for their abstract presentation at a national meeting, and second, to determine which format better met these objectives.

METHODS

We surveyed all first authors of abstracts presented at the 1995 Society of General Internal Medicine (SGIM) annual meeting in San Diego, California, approximately 8 weeks after the meeting. The survey instrument focused

on five objectives identified by consensus of seven participants in a fellow's research seminar: (1) to get feedback and criticism; (2) to share knowledge and ideas with others *within* your field; (3) to share knowledge and ideas with others *outside* your field; (4) to network and develop collaborative projects with others outside your institution; and (5) to develop visibility in your field nationally. Using a 5-point Likert scale with 5 representing most important, respondents rated the importance of each objective and how well their presentation met each objective. We also asked about gender, academic status, fellowship training, and presentation format experience. Responses were compared using χ^2 test. If a respondent presented more than one abstract, the first abstract listed was analyzed.

RESULTS

Surveys were sent to all 259 presenters (an author of this study was excluded). Eight were subsequently excluded either because they did not present, or because the questionnaires were undeliverable. Of 251 potentially returnable surveys, 219 were completed for a response rate of 87.2%. Seventy percent ($n = 153$) were men, similar to the gender composition of the 1995 SGIM membership. There were 66% ($n = 145$) junior faculty (assistant professor or below) and 28% ($n = 61$) senior faculty (associate professor or above). Seventy-seven percent ($n = 168$) had fellowship training. Four respondents did not provide their presentation format; therefore, their objective ratings were not included in the analysis by format.

Neither gender nor academic status was associated with a particular presentation format. Men presented 71% ($n = 70$) of abstracts and 69% ($n = 80$) of posters (relative risk [RR] = 1.07; 95% confidence interval [CI] 0.77, 1.48). Junior faculty presented 75% ($n = 71$) of oral abstracts and 66% ($n = 71$) of posters (RR = 1.36; 95% CI 0.93, 1.98). Fellowship-trained respondents were 1.56 times more likely to give an oral presentation than a poster presentation (95% CI 1.15, 1.84). Presentation experience was not associated with either format.

Using a response of 4 or 5 to indicate importance, the relative ranking of the objectives was as follows: first, sharing knowledge within your field (94%); second, feedback and criticism (82%); third, national visibility (81%); fourth, networking and developing collaborative projects (76%); and fifth, sharing knowledge with others outside your field (50%). Junior faculty rated "feedback and criticism" significantly higher than did senior faculty ($p = .04$). There were no other significant differences in ratings of objectives by academic status. Gender, fellowship training, and the number of previous presentations were not associated with the rated importance of any of the objec-

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tives. The percentages of respondents choosing each objective as most important were as follows: "sharing knowledge within your field," 32% ($n = 69$); "feedback and criticism," 30% ($n = 65$); "national visibility," 23% ($n = 51$); "networking and developing collaborative projects," 11% ($n = 24$); "sharing knowledge with others outside your field," 5% ($n = 10$).

Presentation formats were compared for achievement of each of the five objectives (Table 1). Posters better met the objectives of "feedback and criticism" (RR = 1.52; 95% CI 1.25, 1.84) and "networking and developing collaborative projects" (RR = 1.38; 95% CI 1.10, 1.74). Posters were less likely to meet the objectives of "national visibility" (RR = 0.22; 95% CI 0.16, 0.30) and "sharing knowledge within your field" (RR = 0.60; 95% CI 0.46, 0.78).

Sixty-nine percent of presenters ($n = 145$) preferred to present oral abstracts, although only 14% ($n = 29$) thought they required less preparation. Attendance preferences were 58% ($n = 123$) for oral abstracts, 17% ($n = 37$) for poster sessions, and 24% ($n = 52$) had no preference. Only 4% ($n = 8$) reported that their department's travel support policy depended on the format of presentation.

DISCUSSION

For the majority of presenters at the 1995 SGIM annual meeting, the main objective for presenting their work was sharing knowledge within their field, receiving feedback on their work, or getting national visibility. Most preferred the oral format despite the perception that it requires more work, probably because two of the three highest ranked goals are better achieved with an oral presentation.

Except for increased interest in feedback and criticism among junior faculty, format and goal preferences do not appear to change as one matures academically. Fellowship training was associated with presenting in an oral format. If qualitatively "better" abstracts are accepted for oral presentation, then training received in fellowship may improve research or writing skills.

This study is limited in that it only examined the needs and preferences of the presenters. Respondents made up only 9% of the total membership and approximately 16% of meeting attendees. Nonpresenters may have very different objectives and preferences for research presentations. We conclude that presenters at the SGIM national meeting prefer to present their research in an oral format. Given that there is insufficient time and space to allow all presentations an oral format and that there is a sizable minority who either have no preference or prefer to attend poster sessions, poster presentations should continue as a substantial part of the scientific meeting. However, as meetings become larger and more attendees have research to present, new methods of presenting should be explored. Perhaps a hybrid of the poster and oral format that allows those with posters to briefly present their studies orally would provide more attention to the work of these researchers and better meet their goals. Online computer presentations that allow interactions between presenters and audience may provide another format for greater numbers to present their work and achieve the goals described above. Surveying attendees will provide a more complete assessment of this vital aspect of the scientific meeting and should be performed in a rigorous manner. Improvement in how research is presented should match the advances and development of research methods.

Table 1. Relative Achievement of Objectives by Format of Research Presentation*

Objectives	1		2		3		4		5		Total Responses [†]	
	Poster, %	Oral, %	Poster, %	Oral, %	Poster, %	Oral, %	Poster, %	Oral, %	Poster, %	Oral, %	Poster, n	Oral, n
Feedback and criticism	1.4	2.9	9.1	18.0	22.6	33.0	51.4	40.8	15.4	5.3	208	206
Sharing knowledge with others within field	0	0	8.2	1.9	31.9	18.9	49.8	67.0	10.1	12.1	207	206
Sharing knowledge with others outside field	6.7	1.5	20.7	18.4	38.9	38.9	27.9	35.0	5.8	6.3	208	206
Network and develop collaborative projects	1.0	3.9	19.7	26.8	38.8	42.4	36.1	25.4	4.3	1.5	208	205
National visibility	7.7	0.5	26.9	1.5	44.2	14.6	19.2	58.0	1.9	25.4	208	205

*Response 1 indicates the objective is poorly met; 5, completely met.

[†]Proportions were analyzed by the total number of responses to each objective in each format.