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Five top tips for getting your paper noticed

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Your research breakthrough doesn't just need to be read by the experts, says Mark Lorch.

Guest contributor Mark Lorch

You've just made the breakthrough you've been dreaming of. The days-weeks-months-years in the lab or field have all paid off, and everything has dropped into place. It's the sort of moment that we scientists live for – the buzz of discovery. So now it's time to publish.

Tell your peers about your work and hope it leads to new and even greater things for you, your fellow scientists, and society. But is that really enough? Maybe there's a wider audience for your science, outside of the narrow confines of your academic circle. Maybe it has applications in other fields, or perhaps the public would like to (or even should) know about it. Plus of course if you get your paper noticed it's much more likely to have the citations and impact that you, your department and all the metric measurers have been hoping for.



In the open access era there's nothing stopping anyone from downloading your paper. But there are still hurdles to overcome before getting the wide readership your paper deserves. Based on my experience, here's five tips for helping your paper reach the widest possible audience.

Write a clear paper

Your newly pressed manuscript might have been liberated from those towering paywalls, but it's probably still locked away behind an equally impenetrable comprehension wall. Try reading a paper in an unfamiliar field and the chances are you'll get so lost you won't make it much past the abstract. Now imagine a press officer, journalist, investor or other lay person trying to understand your research.

Communication to a wide audience should start and end with a clear paper. Just like with any good article you need to grab your readers' attention. In the first line let them know why your work is important. Spell out its relevance and impact; don't just assume the reader comes with that knowledge. Keep your prose as light and jargon free as possible, whilst still maintaining the level of accuracy you need for a research paper. Cap things off with a clear conclusion that links back to your opening line. You want a non-expert to come away with a strong, simple take-home message.

Write a lay summary and post it somewhere

The point of the summary is to have somewhere you can point interested people to so they can find an easily digestible version of your work. For maximum impact, keep it short at about 400-600 words. And to make sure it's accessible, have someone who isn't a scientist read it to see if they understand it. Then post it online. Maybe you, your lab, or your department has a blog. If you don't, maybe you should.

Tell your press office about it

The press office is there to help prepare a press release about your research paper, ready to go live with the publication. The news cycle wants fresh material. Something published a few days ago is old news, a week ago and it's history. If you've got a clear paper written and a lay summary ready before your publication date, then your PR team are more likely to get the gist and stay on message.

Prepare your social media circle

Using social media can help get your paper to wider audiences, but it takes a lot more than just one tweet when it gets published. Putting some effort into cyberspace conversations to familiarize yourself with the community can help develop your network and establish you as a contributor to conversations. This creates a supportive network that can lead to relationships in the Twittersphere that are just as powerful as those in real life.

Follow science journalists and editors, and engage with them before you have something to promote. Then when you do they'll be much more likely to recognize you, and interested in what you have to say. For more information on social media, check out Nature Chemistry's Tweetorial.

Use The Conversation and sidestep all of the above

The Conversation is a news site with content coming entirely from researchers in academia from PhD level upwards. Email in an idea for an article (which could be about your latest paper or even someone else's) and an editor will help you craft a piece into something suitable for mainstream media. You get final say on the piece so there's no danger of publishing something you aren't happy with. But the real power of The Conversation is that all articles are then freely available for any other organization to publish, as long as they don't change a word. The result can be extremely impressive. Articles that start life in The Conversation now regularly appear in newspapers, science magazines and news sites worldwide.

Try these tips and your dream breakthrough could be something that everyone is talking about.

Mark Lorch is Associate Dean for Engagement at the University of Hull's Faculty of Science and Engineering. In the lab he's a biochemist; outside of it he's a science communicator.

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