

Starting a Local Science Café

A science café series is a monthly event where scientists and engineers meet with citizens in the area, discuss the research that they pursue, and answer the citizens' questions regarding the research and its applications. The series is a fun and effective way of engaging local citizens in the scientific research conducted in university and industrial labs in their community. Often, citizens feel a disconnect between the tax dollars that in part fund scientific research and the tangible outcomes of the research conducted. Hosting local scientists at a relaxed neighborhood setting can not only bring awareness to local active research, but also makes scientific expertise more accessible, allowing community members to ask scientists questions face-to-face.

Assemble a Planning Committee

A science café series hosted on a regular basis requires a significant amount of coordination and planning that is best served by a dedicated group. Follow the steps below to get started:

- Plan an informational meeting and invite students, faculty, and staff via department email lists, student orientations, libraries, community bulletin boards, and social media outlets.
- Be inclusive when looking for committee members, to promote diversity in ideas and approaches.
- Outline the goals of the science series and assign action items that are necessary to host the first event.

Visualize the Target Audience and the Appropriate Event Format

With the committee, brainstorm the intended audience of the science café series. Should the event be attended by local adult citizens, students from nearby schools, families, or a mixture of demographics? Once the target audience is decided, tailor the format of the science café events to that audience. Some common details to consider are:

- day, time, and frequency of events;
- number of speakers and topics covered in a single event;
- duration of event, time split between speakers and Q&A;
- visuals and associated equipment needed; and
- additional elements, such as trivia questions or raffles.

Experiment with different formats and use feedback from attendees and speakers to tweak the format to best serve the target audience.

Select a Location For the Event

Create a list of potential venues that can accommodate the intended event format and will naturally draw in the target audience. Common venues for a science café series include coffee shops, bookstores with cafés, restaurants/bars. Drop in and discuss the event with management or contact them via phone or email. Present the science café series as an opportunity for the venue to create stronger connections with the community and bring in additional business on a certain day of the week or at a specific time that is otherwise slower for them. Work with the venue to ensure that both organizations will benefit mutually from the partnership.

Acquire Funds if Needed

Additional funds may be needed for venue fees, audio/visual (AV) equipment, trivia prizes, and advertisements. Ask local establishments to sponsor the series by holding a "Science Café Series Night" when a percentage of proceeds are donated to the series. Reach out to university institutes or departments that are related to the topics discussed at the event or science outreach in general. Look into public science groups that offer grants to groups focusing on science policy and communication, such as the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Solicit Researchers to Speak at the Event

Discuss with the planning committee which local scientific research groups to solicit for speakers (e.g, universities, national laboratories, and natural wildlife preserves.) Pitch your event as an opportunity for the researcher to educate others and satisfy any outreach requirements their position may have. Also,

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consider showing your appreciation by providing meals, beverages, or thank-you gifts. As much as possible, your list of invited speakers should be diverse and interdisciplinary. Different speakers bring different perspectives to even the same body of research, so providing a diverse speaker series will contribute a more enriched discussion at each event.

Advertise and Market the Event to the Community

Determine the advertising channels that will most effectively reach the target audience. General advertising media include flyers, postcards, community bulletin boards, local TV and radio stations, and social media. Other more specific avenues include:

- community houses of worship;
- distribution email lists consisting of community members within the planning committee's network;
- bus and train advertising placards; and
- library calendars and bulletin boards.

Design advertisements to be simple, colorful, and informative. Prominently display the date, time, and location of the event, with helpful additional information (e.g., parking locations). Also include a simple, easy-to-read blurb about what the speaker(s) will be discussing to provide a bit of background and pique the reader's interest.

Host the First Event

Be excited! Before the event begins, assign roles to each of the committee members, including a moderator/emcee to introduce the speaker(s) and technical support to test and operate the AV equipment during the event. Hand out prizes to attendees and

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leave additional prizes around the venue to increase the event's visibility in the community.

At the end of the event, distribute a feedback form so audience members can inform the committee about what went well, what can be improved, and suggestions for future topics. Provide incentive for filling out the feedback forms, such as the opportunity to win a gift card to a popular local establishment. Finally, thank the venue and staff for their support to help make the event successful.

Follow Up with Attendees and Incorporate Their Feedback

The first science café event is complete! Following up after the event is critical for keeping your series going. Use social media groups (e.g., Facebook, Reddit) to provide a central location to continue the conversation and share information about future events. Take stock of the feedback and incorporate suggested improvements into future events. Audience members will feel invested in the science café series, will continue to attend and exchange ideas about the science happening all around them, and will work together to make the community more informed as a whole.

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