

The Glass Is Half Full: Museum Outreach Extends to the Pub

By Erika Kiessner

“So, why don’t you tan through a window?”

The man asking the question is in his late twenties, wearing a Philadelphia Eagles jersey and a baseball cap that says United Steelworkers Local 286. He’s holding a pint of Guinness in one hand and a beer-stained coaster in the other. The question he’s just asked us is printed on the coaster, so we’re ready for it. If we’re lucky, the answer will engage him and he’ll start coming up with questions of his own questions we aren’t prepared for. A sudden shout goes up from the bar; it’s somebody’s birthday and tequila is in order. We raise our voices a little, to be heard over the carousing and the jukebox: “Glass is really good at letting through visible light, but it’s not visible light that tans you...”

One of us holds up a half empty pint glass and peers through it illustratively before continuing. This is museum outreach. This is Pub Science.

Attracting new audiences and reaching new people is not a goal unique to us at the Franklin Institute Science Museum in Philadelphia. Any museum with a marketing department knows that there are huge untapped audiences that never really see their advertising; it doesn’t matter where they advertise, it is functionally invisible. These are people who don’t travel in right circles to catch word of mouth buzz either. They don’t have children and they haven’t been to a museum in years. It would never occur to them to visit us, but that doesn’t mean we have nothing to offer them.

What we realized is that if we want to reach an audience that would normally never set foot in our museum, asking them to set foot inside our museum is not going to work. In fact, we shouldn’t ask them to set foot anywhere at all. We should go to them.

We have a building full of people who love science and are skilled at presenting it to

people. At its heart Pub Science is simply the idea that if we get these professionals out to where people go to have a good time then, just maybe, people will talk to them about science and still have a good time.

Of course, there is still the question of how to get the patrons of the bar to talk to us. The answer turns out to be costumes. We turn to the much maligned lab coat to differentiate us from the people we are trying to reach. The very stereotype, offensive to so many scientists, of the nerd in the lab coat with messy hair, pocket protector and glasses is just the thing to make us stand out and even lend us a bit of credibility. If you tell someone you are a scientist, they may be skeptical. But not if you're wearing a lab coat. So we don our costumes and, to ensure that no one mistakes us for frat pledges or medical doctors, we scrawl on a white board: "We are scientists. Ask us anything."

Simplicity is the key here. A handwritten sign is more effective than a professionally designed and printed one. Something about the informality of block printing on a whiteboard gives us an air of approachability, of spontaneity.

Still, this hook isn't quite enough. It's enough to get people interested; maybe they point us out to their friends and talk about us. But if they're going to talk to us they need a prop to break the ice. Taking a cue from the bars themselves, we made coasters, each printed with a science question:

"Why does water put out fire?"

"What is the deal with pheromones?"

"How are magnets made?"

The marketing department loves the coasters. In addition to serving Pub Science's immediate purpose, they are a unique advertising opportunity. The questions on the front carry the museum's branding and the flipsides feature coupons for upcoming events. We distribute them around the bar, scattering them on empty tables and giving them to the bar staff to mix in

with their regular coasters.

The scene set, we sit in our lab coats and wait. Ideally there are three or four of us. Trying to run Pub Science with just two is hard on the “scientists.” There is strength in numbers. On the other hand, with five or more we start to look like a group of people just doing their own thing and people are less likely to approach. We sit at a table, maybe two pushed together, with lots of extra room. The perfect spot is one that can be seen from everywhere in the bar and is in the regular flow of traffic. We make eye contact with bar patrons, trying to look friendly and approachable. We watch people fiddle with the coasters and we wait for someone’s curiosity to get the better of them. Nothing attracts a crowd like a crowd and getting the first question takes the longest.

A typical kind of interaction starts out with a single skeptical person with a few drinks in them approaching us and asking who we are and where we are from. They generally follow with one or more of the questions from the coasters. We try to give answers that invite further science discussion. Often people are surprised to find themselves interested in a kind of science that they can understand. Sometimes these conversations can go on for a very long time. On one occasion, four college students stayed to talk with us for over an hour, asking question after question, giving up their table and settling their tab all while standing at our table talking science.

What makes this program unique is that its scope reaches far beyond attendance. It transcends outreach by being about more than education. Certainly, we hope to educate, but more than that we want to get people thinking about science. We want them to realize it is something they can talk about, something they can have informed opinions about. Science is not limited to labs and schools. Science is everywhere and can be interesting to everyone. Those of us in the science museum field already know this; it is obvious to us. To many people it is anything but.

Through the unusual and irreverent combination of atmosphere, curiosity and alcohol, Pub Science bypasses the internal filters that might tell people: “This isn’t for you.” By being unpretentious and even a little self-mocking, we make ourselves accessible; and that is

everything. Pub Science presents people with an unthreatening access to specialists, their own personal science geeks.

Certainly a program like this invites smart-alecks who want to stump the scientists, show-offs eager to flaunt their education and skeptics who simply want to argue. But with surprising ease, even these interactions quickly give way to positive discussion at the hands of an enthusiastic presenter in such a casual and social environment.

The informality and simplicity of the format grants us a lot of flexibility. If we are in a bar with good turn over, people come and go, so the audience changes from moment to moment. If it is a dead night, we are never stuck in one place. It is no problem to wander to the next bar over and try again. Having no specific start and end times means that if things are going very well we can stay all night, and if things aren't working out we can go home and try another day. Best of all you are sure to find topics that interest the participants because it is the participants who are choosing the topics. This is free choice learning in the most literal sense.

There is a tremendous freedom in the abolishment of the building as a constraint. One bar at a time we are fighting the idea that the learning experience of the museum is bound by four walls and an admissions desk. The greatest success of Pub Science is when someone who might otherwise not have thought about science at all takes away from the experience a fresh-kindled interest. An interest that may not affect only them, but may prompt them to bring it up to their family and friends, even if only in the context of an anecdote about some weirdoes at the bar.

Indeed, in some ways the goal of Pub Science is as lofty as it can be: We aim to bring science back to the people. From the dimly lit corner of the pub we are fighting to initiate a cultural shift in the way science is perceived. The laboratory and those who work therein are too often seen as impermeable enclaves, forever separate from the life and concern of the average person. By bringing the discussion to the watering hole, we break a barrier that half of us thought impenetrable and the other half of us weren't aware existed. "Science belongs to everyone!" we exclaim. It is something we can all become engaged in, as much as is pop culture or politics.

Of course, there *are* parts of the museum mission that can only be carried out inside the institution walls, and in these economic times we don't have the luxury of ignoring ticket sales. Amazingly, the redemption rate of the Pub Science coaster coupons thus far has been around 3.5 percent. Compare this to an average paper coupon redemption rate of less than one percent. People are taking our coasters home. Perhaps giving them away to friends and family but, one way or another, they are getting used. And certainly not everyone who visits the museum as the result of a Pub Science session redeems a coupon.

A different kind of victory for this program, beyond coupon redemption, is that the staff members who participate love the program. It is fun to go out and talk to laypeople about science in this way. The reinforcement of positive interactions with the public in such a mission oriented way reminds us that we are on the right track. There is genuine value in what we do, bringing science to the public. The whole institution of the science museum is validated in the eyes of the people in that moment of understanding the universe in a new way.

Starting the Pub Science program at the Franklin Institute built up a lot of excitement in the building. There is a feeling that we really are doing something new and fresh. For an institution with such a long history of science education, maybe this is the biggest sign of success of all.

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