The travelling circus

Meetings - a chance to meet with colleagues, to hear the latest in scientific breakthroughs (well, gossip) and an opportunity to form new collaborations or alliances with other labs. I used to go to meetings for these reasons. I would go to one or maybe two a year and even sometimes pay for the trip myself! Now, because my work has been deemed to be relatively trendy and relatively successful for the past few years, I have been invited to speak at a few meetings. This is a privilege, and it has provided me with a wealth of opportunities to meet even more new people (because my work is more visible now) and to form even more collaborations. But it has also awakened me to the other side of meetings - the speakers who travel together around the world, listening to each other’s talks several times a season, staying in sometimes questionable hotels and college dormitory rooms and eating conference food, to put on a show. One colleague hit home recently when she referred to us lucky few invited speakers as the ‘travelling circus’.

Is the world really that small? One possible reason for the large overlap of speakers from one meeting to the next is that there actually aren’t that many scientists in each narrow discipline, and so the organizers frequently need to choose from only a few people for each talk. As the number of meetings increases, so does the number of times any one leader in a field is invited to speak at international and national conferences. Furthermore, as we grow ever more aware of fairness and (I shudder to say this) political correctness, organizers of meetings must increasingly consider the numbers of male and female speakers and the representation of various countries at international meetings. However, the reason that the number of meetings (and journals, and review journals) seems to be on the increase must be that the number of scientists is also increasing. So, why isn’t there a larger pool of expert speakers to choose from? I would argue that there probably is, but that we may not always look hard enough to find new people to present their results, because it is much easier to invite the tried and true than to take a chance on disaster.

How does a conference organizer choose speakers? In addition to contacting labs who have published a recent breakthrough, browsing through old meeting programs lying around the office might, I would guess, be one search method. This will inevitably lead to significant redundancy, depending on how many of these old programs the organizers can get their hands on. Another way to select speakers might be by word of mouth - call up your friends and ask whom they recommend for a certain subject. While this might seem a better way to choose new blood, the choices are also likely to be related to recent meetings attended by one’s friends. Another way to choose speakers might be to think of the highest-profile person in each area - again, this image of being ‘high profile’ is likely to depend somewhat on being a member of this travelling scientific circus.
Few would dispute that we have established a group of ‘carnies’ who travel from city to city selling hypotheses and now even cartoon animations of their favorite molecules to an eager audience. But is this good or bad? I guess the Wicked Witch feels strongly both ways on this point. In favor of our tried and true clown performers is the increase in the professionalism of their shows - most of these people are highly interactive and very aware of the big picture in their field. Even if their results are not the most exciting this year, chances are that they can present us with the big picture and tell us a story that will inspire our inquisitive minds. Unfortunately, practice does improve performance, and in many ways a scientific presentation is a performance. It is so easy to distinguish the self-confident flowing storyteller from the nervous novice who stumbles and fumbles with every sentence and drops the remote control several times - and I know to whom I might consider is why they want to host this meeting and what they hope to achieve. This aim could be varied, leading to different meeting formats - for example, what about a meeting where everyone presented his/her work on an equal basis (say a 10-min talk and then 15 min of discussion!) for the purpose of discussing future directions and forming collaborations? Or what about a meeting that forbids the use of data slides but centers on ideas and hypotheses? Or perhaps there could be one discussion leader on a particular topic, and everyone who had relevant data could participate in an interactive way. Clearly there are a lot of possibilities, and these would probably only work for very small meetings, but sometimes I do think we need to try to revitalise open discussion and quench our desire to follow the dogma of our field.

I think most people love to be invited to meetings - it is an honor to have one’s work considered interesting enough to be presented. But one soon realizes that one invitation breeds more, and soon the excitement turns into exhaustion and sometimes even indigestion. This leads to the big-shot mentality of jetting in for one’s own talk and then zooming off home as soon as the applause fades. In the back of every jet setter’s mind must be the fear of one day falling from that high-wire and the fear that this performance will no longer be considered the most amusing. On that sad day, the speaker will have to retreat to the lab, take off the shiny red nose and await the next wave of fame - or, even worse, pay for admission to the circus next year.

The Wicked Witch of the West

Cell Science at a Glance

Our new section – Cell Science at a Glance – is included as a poster in the paper copy of the journal and available in several downloadable formats in the online version, which we encourage readers to download and use as slides. Future contributions to this section will include signalling pathways, phylogenetic trees, multiprotein complexes, useful reagents... and much more.

We would like to encourage readers to submit ideas for future contributions to this section. Potential Cell Science at a Glance articles should be addressed to the Executive Editor and sent to Journal of Cell Science, 140 Cowley Rd, Cambridge, UK CB4 0DL