

Letter to the Editor

Initial experience with a new communication tool: the ‘Digital Interactive Poster Presentation’

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1. Introduction

The abstracts sent to large scientific meetings have traditionally been divided into oral and poster presentations. The traditional poster presentation is often associated with a sense of frustration and incompleteness by the presenters and the audience. Traditional posters are seen as inadequate communication tools since they only reach a limited audience.

We propose a new system for organizing poster sessions the ‘Digital Interactive Poster Presentation’ (DIPP). This new system allows participation of a larger audience, interactive presentation, and more effective discussion of scientific data.

2. Materials and methods

One-thousand and seventy-nine abstracts were submitted to the 14th Meeting of the European Association of Cardio-thoracic Surgery (EACTS). Two-hundred and fifty-one (23.3%) were accepted for presentation: 130 were selected for oral presentation, and 121 for poster presentation.

We asked all poster presenters to send their poster data in a digital or an analog format in advance. The instructions and some tools for preparing the digital posters were recorded on a CD-ROM and sent to the presenters. Since a large number of different programs and formats can be used for preparing digital images, we offered the widest possible range of options.

2.1. Organizational issues for these new poster sessions

Fifteen poster sessions were scheduled during the meeting. The authors were asked to give a short (2 min) summary of the poster. This was followed by a discussion led by the chairman of the session. The technical system projected the previously processed digital poster onto a large screen (Fig. 1). The presenter was able to magnify the details of his/her poster (i.e. text, figures, tables, or graphs) during the presentation and during the discussion. In addition, presenters were asked to place the poster in the permanent poster exhibition area at the beginning of the scientific sessions and to leave it there until the end of the meeting. This allowed the audience and the chairpersons to view the posters at any time in the course of the congress.

A digital poster preview desk was instituted in order to instruct the presenters on how to deal with the data projection. In order to optimize the presentation time it was agreed that the presenters would encircle the details they wanted to have projected on the screen with the laser pointer, and the technicians would magnify those elements.

A short questionnaire for evaluating the acceptance of DIPP was distributed during the poster sessions.

3. Results

The acceptance from poster presenters was good with 93% of posters being received for processing of the data prior to or at the beginning of the meeting. All posters, but one (99.2%) were received prior to the beginning of the poster sessions.

The program used most often for preparing the digital poster was PowerPoint®. A list of the programs most commonly used by the presenters are listed in Table 1.

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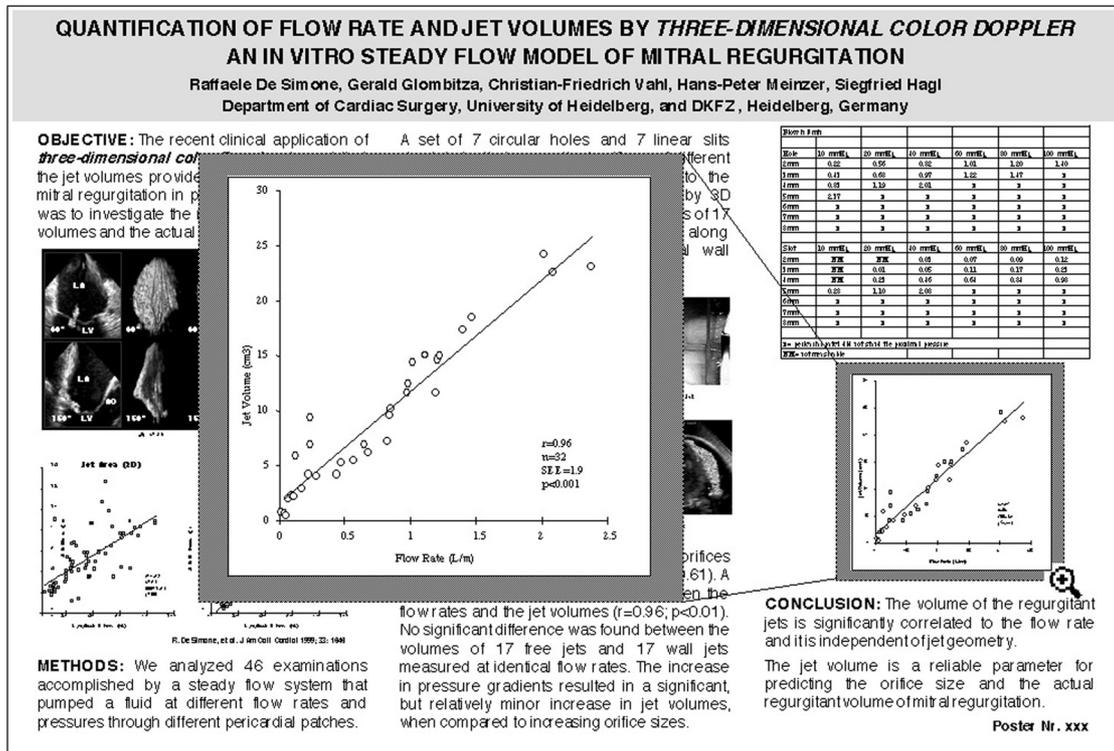


Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of a digital interactive poster presentation. The magnification of a detail can be obtained by using the magnifying glass tool.

The acceptance of audience, presenter and chairperson was assessed from the questionnaire. Ninety-six percent (from a sample of 230 responses) responded 4 or 5 on an arbitrary scale of 1-5, regardless of being audience, presenter or chairperson.

There was an overwhelming advice to the organizer of the meeting to incorporate digital poster presentations into the future format of the meeting.

4. Discussion

In most scientific meetings the poster sessions consist of a 'guided tour' by the chairmen to the exhibition area where a few people who are highly interested in that specific topic carry out a short informal discussion in front of the poster.

Table 1
File Formats

Used Programs	N	%
Corel Draw	8	7
Adobe Illustrator	2	2
Portable Document Format (pdf)	11	10
Quark Expres	2	2
Pagemaker	1	1
Powerpoint	86	77
Word (doc)	2	2
Total	112	100

Traditional poster sessions thus were not conceived for a large audience. There is a need to improve the quality and thus the impact of poster sessions.

The wide acceptance of this new communication tool (DIPP) is mainly based on the broad diffusion of personal computers for presenting scientific data [1-3]. The geographical distribution of the poster presenters who sent the digital data in advance showed no differences between highly industrialized and developing countries.

Another decisive factor that contributed to the success of DIPP was the facility of rapid communication through electronic mail. Only 11 out of 121 (9%) presenters could not be contacted by e-mail, mostly due to an incorrect transcription of the e-mail address. Seventy-six (62.8%) sent the poster data electronically as an e-mail attachment. This will probably increase in the future.

The implementation of these new poster sessions required additional organizational efforts. A digital poster preview desk had to be set up for checking on-site the correctness of the poster data. This office became a sort of technical check point, where it was also possible to make some on-site corrections and where the data from eight presenters who had not sent the data in advance could be converted.

Some reluctance was expressed regarding the deadline for sending the digital data; however, most of presenters agreed to send the posters with a slight delay so that they had time to complete their studies and to analyze the latest results prior to fixing them definitively in an official presentation. The deadline was absolutely necessary for preparing

the 121 digital poster presentations in advance. We also offered the option of bringing a conventional poster just prior to the session, but fortunately only very few presenters ($n = 8$) took up this option. A larger number of 'on-site' conversion into digital posters would have caused the digital preview desk to collapse or necessitated a larger staff.

Among the suggestions regarding the DIPP was the need for standardizing font dimensions and formats. Setting limits would have made it easier to prepare the DIPP; however, this would have restricted the aesthetic aspect of the posters. The decision to accept every kind of format was made in order to preserve the heterogeneity of this lively and colourful communication tool.

According to the questionnaires, the use of landscape format was unanimously considered better than portrait format by the audience. Another recurring comment was that with the introduction of DIPP not only the presentations, but also the discussions were interactive, since the presenters were given an additional opportunity to show data during the discussion.

5. Conclusions

This first experience with the DIPP was met with wide and enthusiastic acceptance by the audience, presenters, and

chairpersons of the 14th EACTS Meeting. All poster presenters were able to send digital data for preparing the DIPP, independent of the country, of the computer equipment, and of the software. DIPP immediately took on the role of a simple, easy to use, and technically reliable communication tool that can re-establish, in the era of global communication, the dignity of poster presentations at scientific meetings.

References

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Appendix A

Technical details and instructions are available on the EACTS homepage <http://www.eacts.org>