

How do I choose an audience to engage with?

Narrowing down from the general public to a specific audience.

When thinking about your public engagement, you may have already identified your audience as the ‘general public’. But appealing to a more specific group will be much more powerful. This guide will help you target a segment of the general public, and develop an activity that considers their interests and needs.

1 | Tailor to specific groups

The general public is everyone – including you, your family, your neighbours and the people you pass on the street. This vast group of people is difficult to cater for as a whole – think how different your elderly neighbour is to the group of twenty-somethings you pass in the park. Designing an engagement activity that will interest everyone would be near impossible – and therefore is unlikely to meet the needs of any individual.

Designing an engagement activity is not dissimilar to providing food for a large event. Imagine trying to create a dish to be enjoyed by the ‘general public’. Once you’ve taken into account potential allergies, dietary requirements, and preferences, what would you be left with? Instead, imagine having to cater for vegetarian pizza enthusiasts. You probably already have a pretty clear idea of what you would cook for them, and whether or not they would like it. The more specific your audience is, the easier planning an activity for them will be.

The “general public” myth

You may want your activity to be ‘for everyone’, but every decision you make as you design an activity will narrow your audience down in that some groups may be more likely to participate and others less so. If you host an event at an Imperial campus, only those able and willing to travel there will turn up. If your event is at 3pm on a Thursday, anyone with a 9-5 job is unlikely to make it. If your event is a theatre production, it will appeal to an arts crowd. By deciding on a target audience from the outset you can look closely at each decision you make and consider how this might affect who is likely to participate.

2 | Identify your audience

To identify your audience start by thinking about what the aims of your activity are. If you haven't decided what your aims are yet, take a look at our guidance on aims of public engagement. Your aims can help you narrow down the groups you interact with, by helping to consider which groups are most relevant or who needs to be involved. For example, if your aim is to encourage people to recycle more, you could find out which local boroughs are recycling the least and speak with families within those communities.

Sometimes your aims might be broad and won't help to narrow down an audience, for example you might want to inspire people with your research topic. In this case, think about what audiences you'd really like to connect with or perhaps those you already have skills in working with or existing connections. Would you like to share your work with the elderly, or get experience working with schools? Are there particular groups who

are under-represented in your area of research that you would like to speak with?

What if I'm taking part in an activity that someone else is organising?

If you are not designing the activity yourself, speak with the organisers about the intended audience. Try to get plenty of detail. For large and ongoing engagement activities such as the Great Exhibition Road Festival, there may be an evaluation report describing which groups have attended historically that you could use to select a key audience for your own part of the activity.

Top tips:

- Think through your aims for your public engagement to help identify a relevant target audience.
- Ask about expected or previous audiences if you are taking part in someone else's event.

3 | Get to know your audience

Getting to know your audience is a great way to make sure your activity is planned with them in mind. If you can build your activity around their interests and needs you will:

- Attract them to your event and motivate them to take part.
- Make the activity more accessible, enjoyable and memorable.
- Be more likely to have the impacts you desire.

An easy way to build up a picture of what your audience is like is by creating a profile for them based on answering a few questions about their characteristics.

Our audience profile template can help you with this.

One approach is to think of someone you know who fits within your target group. You may be able to fill out the template on their behalf. If not, you can also try reaching out to a member of this group and using the prompts to guide a discussion with them.

Top tips:

- Find out the interests and needs of your audience to highlight what kind of activity might work for them.
- Use our audience profile template to focus your thinking.

4 | Design your activity

You can use your reflections on your target audience to design an activity that is suited to them. You could link to their interests to make it appealing and relevant, and try considering cultural, social and economic factors to ensure that it is accessible to them. Alternatively, why not include members of your target audience in design your activity? Co-production can be a powerful way to involve your target audience and help ensure your activity is relevant.

If you think it may be difficult to reach your audience, partnerships and networks can help you access specific groups. If you want to engage with young parents you could collaborate with a childcare programme. To reach out to farmers, you could contact Farmer's Weekly to

put a call out in their newsletter. Also think of resources you might need to make your activity accessible to your audience, such as a translator or wheelchair access. As you begin to design your activity you will make lots of decisions; where it will be held and when; what the format will be; who will be involved. By making these decisions with your audience in mind you increase the chance of their participation and the impact you will have.

Top tips:

- Make your activity accessible and attractive by considering the needs, motivations and behaviours of your audience.
- Test out your assumptions by discussing your ideas with members of your audience.

5 | Test your ideas

Testing your ideas with your audience will allow you to check any assumptions you might have made. You could get in contact with a couple of people who fit into your audience type and discuss your activity with them.

A couple of conversations can help confirm if your event is likely to be successful and identify any areas you might want to tweak before investing time and resources into creating your activity.

Some questions you might ask are:

- What would you like about this activity?
- Is there anything that you might find off-putting?
- What would you expect from the activity?
- Is there any way you would want to change it?

Case study: What The Tech?!

What is it?

Students meet weekly with older White City residents to support them in using technology such as mobile phones, Skype and iPads.

Why is it a good example?

The programme responds to a need, that was identified by community group leaders, around developing digital literacy amongst elderly residents from a particular residential estate. The activity is held in a community centre on the estate, at a regular time in the afternoon when students have no teaching so are able to take part. Refreshments are provided.

As well as increasing confidence and digital skills, the programme has other impacts on those participating such as reduced social isolation in older residents and increased communication skills in students.



Related links and resources - Let us know of others!

- **British Science Association** – Audience Segmentation Map: britishscienceassociation.org/our-audience-model
The BSA has divided the public into four main groups and uses this model to prioritise their activities and decide how to target them. Find out which group your target audience falls into.
- **The Audience Agency** – Audience Spectrum: theaudienceagency.org/off-the-shelf/audience-spectrum
The Audience Agency's segmentation tool groups audiences into ten different spectrum profiles based on trends in cultural habits, interests, life stage and social factors.
- **Morris Hargreaves McIntyre** – Culture Segments: mhminsight.com/culture-segments
Culture Segments is a segmentation tool often used in the culture sector to help you understand and engage with your attenders and non-attenders.