



PROFILE

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Sharing Science - Discoveries on Display

In this science communication (scicom) series, members of the Division for Strategic Public Relations suggest ways UTokyo researchers can share their expertise beyond their professional circle. Today we're going to explore how museums and installations can bring your research to new audiences in fun and exciting ways.

What's in a museum?

Young and old alike, everybody loves a good museum. They're a great way to spend a day when you're on holiday at home or abroad. And there are many kinds, each catering to different interests: Science, social or ancient or natural history, fashion — there's something for everyone. Museums are often some of the most popular tourist destinations, meaning they provide a great audience for the items exhibited within. But what's this got to do with you?

Well, the objects on display don't put themselves there. People have carefully chosen specific items they

think convey a piece of a story, told by an exhibition. These people are called curators, and a long time ago, I was lucky enough to be a curator of contemporary science at the London Science Museum. There I learned, amongst other things, the benefits to researchers of having objects related to their research on display. Researchers like you.

Why put my research on display?

A popular museum can receive millions of visitors each year; that means approximately twice that many millions of eyes could gaze upon something you have lovingly created. And items on display always have accompanying text (in museum vernacular we call that interpretation) — this would reference your research and your department. I'm sure you all have fond memories of visiting museums throughout your lives. Imagine inspiring a child into exploring your field of research because of something cool they saw on display.

However, not all research necessarily involves physical objects, which could include both items studied as well as items created for purpose of study. And there are many properties of objects that might make them desirable for inclusion in a museum exhibition, including size, aesthetics, and whether there is an interesting story behind the object in question. Sometimes objects relating to sciences such as physics can be difficult as they might be too small to see, or they might just be a metallic box. But if something is interesting to you, it is probably also interesting to someone else.

How do you get your research into a museum?

As with many things in life, do your homework and persevere. You could start by thinking about what museums might be interested in your research. Then explore online or in person the kinds of displays they have: Do they display big things, small things, new things, old things, and so on. If you investigate a little

before contacting any curatorial staff, then it should be easier to pitch an idea to them — at the very least they will take you seriously.

Most often a museum will not list its curators or their contact details online, but the general information staff should be able to put you in touch with someone if you ask to speak with a curator of a certain subject area; for example, meteorites, Edo era, Italian formal dress — you get the idea. When you get to speak to a curator, you could tell them about the area of the museum you think your research object might be suitable for. Sometimes displays within exhibitions are changed often, and sometimes not. Luck is always a factor. But curators are always looking out for more things, and it's a good way to start the conversation.

Patience is important, as museums usually plan exhibitions years in advance. This also means that they frequently borrow objects from researchers for periods of time ranging from a few months to many years. But if you have something

you want to show to the world, and if you think other people will find it interesting, then there's a good chance that a museum somewhere in Japan or abroad would be keen to display that something too.

When researchers do get to have something put on display in an exhibition, the feeling can be amazing.

Curators take time to write interesting facts about the objects from their prior conversations with the researcher. Often the item will tell part of a story and it can feel very significant when exhibited like that.

Ultimately, having items on display in museums gets you great coverage for very little effort.



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