Engagement
Bringing science out of the lab to the public

One of the Franklin’s core values is to ‘leave a legacy to be proud of’, and the communications team has continued to work unstintingly behind the scenes with local Oxfordshire schools to engage directly with pupils in their classrooms.

The Franklin’s communications and engagement team work closely with Education Business Partnership’s Hi-tech Horizons scheme, which aims to reach 50,000 pupils in five years and interest them in science and technology careers. In regular visits, the Franklin’s communications team address school classes, running a core programme of information and activities over several hours.

During the pandemic, the Franklin team worked hard to switch to virtual seminars, which resulted in some additional benefits. Communications and Engagement Manager Dr Caitlin Higgott explains: ‘Not only could we reach bigger groups – hosting entire year groups on one call – but being online enabled our scientists to take part in sessions more easily, rather than needing to block a day out to travel.’

The business of science
However, as the pandemic has eased, schools are now keen to engage face-to-face as much as possible. The Franklin typically targets Years 8-10 – the group that is keen to engage face-to-face as much as possible. The Franklin’s communications team address school classes, running a core programme of information and activities over several hours.

But the learning isn’t only in one direction; school pupils can be hard to impress, and running the sessions provides useful experience for the team and for any session ‘guests’ from the Franklin. It can be a training ground for some of the Franklin’s younger researchers to meet what Dr Higgott calls a ‘brutally honest’ audience! She says: ‘We find it can really help our staff with their communications skills. It’s not enough to speak to audiences that already know the value of what we do; it’s much harder to enthuse new audiences. Having that more unsympathetic perspective makes us question ourselves as well!’

An ‘aha!’ moment
Combining science with a business outlook is sometimes an ‘aha!’ moment for students who have presumed science isn’t profitable, or haven’t previously seen a connection to business.

But the learning isn’t only in one direction; school pupils can be hard to impress, and running the sessions provides useful experience for the team and for any session ‘guests’ from the Franklin. It can be a training ground for some of the Franklin’s younger researchers to meet what Dr Higgott calls a ‘brutally honest’ audience! She says: ‘We find it can really help our staff with their communications skills. It’s not enough to speak to audiences that already know the value of what we do; it’s much harder to enthuse new audiences. Having that more unsympathetic perspective makes us question ourselves as well!’

A question and answer session follows every event, and feedback is valuable, with students often saying that they didn’t understand where science funding comes from, or appreciate the variety of roles in the sector. Since the Franklin is publicly funded, it’s vital that the public understand what we are doing.

Occasionally the sessions have led to follow up activity, such as visits and work experience for A-level students at the Franklin, during which they may work on assigned tasks, such as the synthesis of aspirin, working alongside the Biological Mass Spectrometry team with their equipment and evaluating samples for purity.

Dr Higgott concludes: ‘It’s quite a time commitment, but I get a lot out of it, and it’s rewarding to see students’ perspectives on science – and the possibility of a role in it for themselves. We love seeing the students come back for more – and hope that in time, some may end up working or studying at the Franklin.’

Staying in the headlines
Another important part of engaging the public is making sure that the Franklin’s achievements are featured in the national and international press. Notable last year was the media coverage around the Franklin’s key research into llama antibodies which had been found to have significant potential as a treatment for Covid-19.

Timed to coincide with the paper’s publication in Nature Communications, the press release highlighted the involvement of Fifi the Llama, part of the antibody production facility at the University of Reading, and the communications team hosted an online media briefing, giving journalists the opportunity to question the Franklin’s scientists, Professors Ray Owens, Jim Naismith and Dr Miriam Weckener live about the work.

The story captured the media’s attention, and the Franklin’s work was subsequently covered in high-profile national outlets – including by the BBC Online, with interviews on Radio 4 as well as the BBC World Service; the Times, the Daily Mail, the Independent and the Daily Telegraph; and was picked up by the Press Association, leading to even more coverage. International outlets also covered the story, including the Sydney Morning Herald, Canada’s CTV and Newsweek, as well as specialist publications such as Wired.

Director of Strategic Marketing and Culture, Laura Holland, said: ‘It’s vitally important that the Franklin’s work continues to be covered by the press; it’s a gateway to the public. They’re paying for our work, so they have a right to know what we are spending it on!’