

Is scientific crowdfunding worth it? Let's find out!

April 1 2016, by Jens Hegg

What does it take to get ordinary people to fund your science? This is the first in a series of posts that will explore the brave new world of scientific crowdfunding from the inside, as I go from launching to, hopefully, funding a scientific project by donation.

What scientist doesn't need more research funding? Even the most important research endeavors seem, in this day and age, to be constantly looking for additional funds to tackle a new problem, explore a new idea, or spur a collaboration. Money makes the scientific world go round, but getting it isn't always easy to find, and government grants are getting more and more competitive.

At the same time, many of us have been contacted by friends and asked to donate to a crowdfunding campaign for their band's next album, or that invention they cooked up in their garage. Many of us have asked ourselves, 'if someone can [raise more than half a million dollars](#) to create a salt shotgun to kill flies, why can't scientists raise their [research funding](#) the same way?'

Actually, you can. Several startups exist dedicated to raising funds for science from the general public. Walacea and Experiment seem to be the dominant players right now, though there are plenty of others out there that fill other niches, such as Consano which pairs donors directly with medical researchers.

Until last week I have to admit that I thought the idea of crowdfunding

was interesting, but I never had a good reason to go out asking for money. But, the need and the timing converged with an email from Experiment last week and I decided to take the plunge.

I've been working on a side-project reconstructing migration of Amazonian goliath catfish (the longest freshwater migration in the world) for several years now. The whole project, from sampling to analysis and finally [publication with PLOS One](#), has been funded on a shoestring. Sample prep and analysis has been done when I could fit it in around my PhD work. But, now is the time to parlay these initial findings into a larger, more focused (and hopefully funded) project that will continue beyond the end of my PhD.

The email I received was clearly a mass mailing, citing a talk I had given at the American Fisheries Society national meeting in Portland, OR...a meeting [I blogged about last summer](#)...that was probably skimmed from the web. The only thing that kept me from deleting it was the mention of a fish-specific contest, and the promise that the leading projects would get up to \$1500 directly from Experiment toward their goal. I figured it was worth a shot at trying to fund the travel and planning for the next steps of our catfish study.

But, even today, I wonder if it's worth my time and whether I can reach the goal. I have a friend who is somewhat of a startup savant. He has ideas pouring out of him constantly, from turning coffee shops across the country [into alternative movie theaters](#) to [new blends of tea and coffee](#). His efforts make clear [how hard it is to get peoples attention and get them to support a new idea](#).

In this case, the reward seems greater than the risks so I decided it was worth it to give it a try. It's a side project that I care very deeply about...but if I don't get the money I'll keep plugging along unfunded as usual. Luckily, my PhD doesn't hang in the balance.

Hopefully, as I go through the process I can help those of you who are wondering about crowd funding to see what it's like from the inside of a crowdfunding campaign and whether this approach might work for you. There are articles, including a good one in PLOS Biology, that deal with these issues, but I don't know if anyone has written about the day-to-day process of funding research directly from the public.

What I've Learned So Far

[My project](#) launches on April 7th on Experiment. Over the last few days I have come to realize that there is a lot of content creation involved in setting up one of these efforts.

While you might be able to copy and paste methods and sections from prior grant applications when you are submitting to a government agency, all the language in a crowdfunding page needs to be written from scratch. The kind of scientific mumbo-jumbo that we are all comfortable with in grant applications and manuscripts just doesn't fly with the public.

Jargon filled passages like, "Using isotopic tracers including $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ we plan to reconstruct the life-history of *B. rousseauxii* from signatures recorded in their otoliths. This will provide the first temporally and spatially explicit understanding of their 5,500km migration from the Amazon estuary to the Andes foothills," simply don't fly in this game.

If you aren't proficient in making your science understandable to the public this process will drag that skill out of you in spades, or you will spend hours clawing at a keyboard and hours more in the fetal position.

For one thing, each section on the front page of your project with Experiment is limited to 800 characters. It is not a simple task to explain and justify a complicated scientific subject in that amount of space,

especially when jargon shorthand is off limits! For new graduate students this would be great practice in framing your planned work. You couldn't complete this without a solid understanding of what your research plans, goals and broader impacts are. And that's only the text, you also have to have a video.

Actually, the video is optional, but Experiment strongly implies that without one it's awfully hard to keep peoples' attention. I was able to film and edit what I think is a pretty good video in about three hours.

With the help of a free, online teleprompter, an iPhone 6, iMovie and a quiet, well lit, place to film I was able to turn a quickly written script into something I think is worth spending 3 minutes watching.

Also, you have to chase endorsements from experts in the field. This, actually, is a good thing. By having people who know the science take the time to support it with a blurb it keeps the riff-raff down.

Imagine that without this step (and the internal team that reviews all the projects and approves them) Experiment might be flooded with sham science like the Triton Gills that has raised more than \$800,000 on Indiegogo [to build a device that would only work by defying physics and chemistry](#). Last night I wrote about twenty emails asking for endorsements from fisheries scientists I know. One responded right away, which is good because you need at least one endorsement to launch a project. We'll see how many I need to prod and how much time that takes.

So far it's been a very positive experience. I'm always interested in working on new ways to communicate my science clearly to a more general audience. I'll post again after my project launches with more information about how this process is proceeding.

More information: Jens C. Hegg et al. Diverse Early Life-History Strategies in Migratory Amazonian Catfish: Implications for Conservation and Management, *PLOS ONE* (2015). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0129697](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0129697)

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