

Moderate with Moderation - 10 Steps to Running a Successful Panel Discussion (Jun 11)

By Angela DeFinis

If you've ever moderated a panel discussion or have seen a poorly-run panel, you know how difficult the task can be: One panel member rambles on, another tries to dominate the discussion, and someone else disturbs the group by continually shuffling papers. It's enough to make you shirk at the idea of ever moderating a panel.

But don't despair. Moderating a panel discussion can be a rewarding experience—one that enables you to guide both the panel and audience while providing structure and support so the panel's talent and expertise shine through. When you moderate effectively, you manage the audience and your panel members so everyone benefits.

The purpose of a panel discussion is to bring together top talent in one area so that a group of experts can share and build upon each other's experience. Panel discussions are useful if an issue is too complex for one person to handle, or if the audience needs to be exposed to various people or viewpoints at the same session.

Typically, panel discussions have a goal in mind, whether to introduce a new concept, disseminate facts, show different points of view, get people thinking in a new direction, or any one of a hundred other possibilities.

Unfortunately, many panel discussions fall short of their objective and deteriorate into long-winded, disjointed, and boring mini-presentations from the various panel members. This is why having an effective panel moderator is so important. Even the most brilliant panelists need someone to guide the discussion, keep everyone on task, and ensure that the audience is engaged in a meaningful and lively discussion that ultimately benefits them.

To succeed as a panel moderator, use the following 10 tips.

1. Keep the Panel Small and Focused

Just because you're having multiple perspectives on a topic doesn't mean you need an army of panelists. Panels that are too large are unwieldy and difficult to manage, while panels that are too small make it difficult to flesh out all the points of view. The ideal panel number is the "fabulous four"—four experts in the chosen topic who have different experiences and who don't always agree with each other.

2. Get to Know Your Panel Members

Gather the panelists ahead of time on a conference call to discuss the content and the format of the session. Plan out whether each speaker will be given a set amount of time, or if the session will be wholly interactive, meaning a moderator firing questions at the panel. If each speaker has a set amount of time, determine which panelist will focus on which part of the topic to keep from duplicating presentation points.

Finally, collect biographies of the speakers for introduction purposes. Make sure you have the pronunciation of each speaker's name correct.

3. Plan the Questions Ahead of Time

No one likes to be surprised by curveball questions. And while a little controversy and "throwing people off guard" can keep things interesting, you want your panel members to feel comfortable and confident in the topic at hand. Therefore, plan two or three questions per panel member, and send them your questions ahead of time. Ask that they don't create "scripted" answers to your questions,

but that they merely review the questions and come up with some bullet points to discuss during the panel presentation.

4. Meet and Greet the Day or Night of the Event.

Arrange for you and your panel members to meet in the Speakers' Lounge or the actual session room to introduce themselves and check in. Plan to arrive at either location at least 30-45 minutes before the session is due to start. Hold a brief rehearsal, reviewing the format of the session and either the questions you'll start with or who will present first.

Also use this time to hook up and test any equipment, check microphones, set up notes, and get settled before the audience arrives.

5. Open with a Brief Reference to the Topic Being Discussed

The moderator sets and maintains the tone for the panel discussion, so it's important to welcome the audience and lead into the topic with a short hook. A lengthy story is not appropriate, but a short quote, analogy, or anecdote will kick off the discussion, warm up the audience, and highlight the importance of the event.

6. Introduce the Panel Members

When it comes to introducing the panel members, you have two options. 1) You can have each panel member introduce him or herself with a short two-minute introduction, or 2) You can introduce the panelists. With the first option, you give the audience a chance to settle in and have a more personal connection to the panel members. With the second option, you set a more formal tone.

With either option, make sure you or the panel member adds a human element to the introduction. Simply listing job titles and credentials gets boring; therefore, try to mention some interesting tidbits, such as, "Jack is the father of quadruplets," or "Shirley is also a backyard gardener who specializes in award-winning tomatoes."

7. Keep the Focus on the Panel, Not on You.

Even though you may be a well-known expert in the topic or have some celebrity status in your industry, don't make the panel discussion about yourself. Your role is to guide the conversation, maintain an appropriate tone, keep people on task, and ensure everyone gets ample time to present his or her point of view. You are not there to give a formal presentation or state your opinions, so for now, keep them to yourself.

8. Prepare Your "Cut-off Phrases" Ahead of Time

Be prepared to cut off long-winded panel members or those who ramble off topic. Having some pre-planned cut-off phrases helps. For example, if someone goes off on a tangent that is not useful to the overall topic, you could interrupt and say, "You have an interesting point there, but we want to know more about _____."

Likewise, if someone is dominating the discussion, watch the person's natural breathing rhythm and then interject between breaths, "Thank you, Julie. Now let's hear Bob's perspective on this topic." It's always best to ask the panel members what "cutoff phrases" they respond to. Tell them you will use this tactic for keeping the discussion focused and on time.

9. Have Microphones in the Audience for the Question and Answer Session

Before opening the floor for questions, tell the audience any ground rules for asking questions that you want them to follow. Then, encourage the audience to ask questions, but never turn the

microphone over to an audience member. If an audience member starts to drone on, politely interrupt and ask him or her to state a question.

If an audience member asks a question that's overly specific to a single panelist or otherwise not particularly relevant to the concerns of the wider audience, don't be afraid to say, "That's an interesting question and perhaps better addressed in depth by Panelist A after the wider Q&A we're doing now."

Finally, if you're in a big room, not everyone will hear the questions when they're asked, so always repeat the question. Add one quick summary comment after each question to transition to the next question.

10. Give a Gracious "Thank You" to Each Panel Member

You certainly can't thank your panelists enough for sharing their expertise. In addition to a verbal "thank you" after the panel discussion, some people give their panelists a small gift at the event or send a handwritten note afterwards, or both.

If you received positive feedback from your audience about the panel—either on feedback forms or just informally after the session—you should convey that information to your panelists.

Moderate for Success

When you do a great job as moderator by bringing out the best in the panelists, the audience will appreciate you. They'll remember your name and seek out your expertise in the future. So in a sense, being a moderator is a great opportunity for you to enhance your credibility and your reputation, but only if you do it right.

Use these 10 tips to ensure you moderate with ease—and with power—so you can showcase your panelists and ultimately yourself.

About the Author

Angela DeFinis is an expert in professional public speaking. As an author, speaker, and CEO/Founder of [DeFinis Communications Inc.](#), she has spent over twenty years helping business professionals find solutions to their communication challenges and develop a broader repertoire of potent speaking skills.

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