

panel tool kit

5 Steps to a Great Panel

Originally published on LinkedIn by Joanne Kamens on Oct 22, 2014

Long Before the Event...

- Choose a moderator with a backbone. It is nice to have a subject area expert, but the moderator is not a panelist and will play a different role so her ability to control the event is what is important.
- Choose 4 panelists (maybe 5) and no more. Too many panelists will negatively affect timing and the liveliness of the discussion (see below on timing). Get good resumes or LinkedIn profiles of all panelists to the moderator.
- The moderator and organizers should develop a list of 4-6 pre-event interview questions. The moderator (possibly with an organizer) should set up a 30 minute call with each panelist to get to know their style and to get their answers to the questions. Don't try to get all panelists on the phone at once - you won't get as much out of it and it will be impossible to schedule.
- In the pre-event interviews, the moderator should be taking good notes and discovering interesting stories, riffs or opinions that each panelist can contribute. The moderator should identify the funny, provocative or interesting stories that will make for a fun discussion. People are much better at remembering these things on a relaxed phone call than when first confronted on a stage in front of a crowd.
- The moderator will then develop a final list of questions for the actual event, based on these interviews. The idea is to ask questions in a directed way to bring out these interesting stories and remind the panelists of the stories or topics you know they can speak about. There should be some spontaneity, but having a good handle on some interesting questions and topics in advance is key.
- Make sure all your panelists have the correct date, location and parking information and remind them about the event as it approaches.

Room Set-up and Logistics

- To make a really lively discussion, I strongly suggest asking the panelists not to use any slides for the event. Slides are for presentations, not discussions. I will rarely work with a panel if slides are allowed.
- Don't put your panelists behind a table. It adds a formality and distance that prevents interaction with each other and the audience. Put the panel on a stage if the room is very big, but for an intimate event, put the panelists on the same level as the audience.
- In my experience the best set-up is panelists in a slight semi-circle (so they can see each other) on comfortable chairs (stools if you have to, but this is tough for women in skirts, especially short people - which I am, so I hate stools). I like it when the moderator sits in the middle, but the side can work.

panel tool kit

5 Steps to a Great Panel

- Only put out enough seats for the expected attendees (you can have extras ready if you are blessed with an unexpectedly great turnout). This gets people to sit close to the front so the interactions are better.
- Have a good microphone system ready for each panelist if the room needs it (lapel mics are best).

The Moderator Takes Control

- It is the moderator's job to prevent anyone from derailing the show. The moderator must be very active at all times keep things moving and to prevent any one panelist or audience member from taking over.
- My own personal rule is that I do not let the panelists introduce themselves. I do a 1-2 minute introduction. If you chose good panelists, they are going to be good at talking, so they will easily take 5 minutes to introduce themselves and, voila, 1/2 of your time is gone with no interesting discussion. The audience knows these people and bios were likely part of the publicity. Good panels do not waste time on long introductions.
- The moderator asks questions, calling on 1-2 panelist for each question in a way that elicits those interesting stories and opinions. Don't let all the panelists answer all the questions (they won't all have interesting or new answers). Know when to move on to the next topic.
- There must be some spontaneity so a moderator should be prepared with different questions than those on the prep calls, but often the prep calls provide good ideas for interesting questions. Be ready to encourage back and forth within the panel. Go with it when this happens, but get things back on track if the direction of the interaction is not interesting to the audience. It is a bit of an art, but active moderation gets easier with practice.

Up the Audience Fun Factor

- What is fun for the audience? Getting involved and feeling "closer" to the panel. Your audience may have a lot of real or self-proclaimed experts on the topic at hand. You can use this to the advantage of the program.
- Start the program by polling the audience with a few questions. Who is out there? What do they do? Find out their areas of science or expertise by listing some and asking people to raise hands in response. I am always ready with some written poll questions to get things started.
- Give a couple of audience members a chance to participate. For example, at a recent event on nonprofit science organizations, I asked audience members to stand and describe unique nonprofit models that differed from the companies represented on the panel.

panel tool kit

5 Steps to a Great Panel

- This “spontaneous” participation can be pre-planned if the moderator knows some of the people in the audience. I always try to meet audience members before a panel discussion and often incorporate them into the program. I have to admit to inviting interesting friends and colleagues to events for this purpose.
- If possible, make sure the panelists are prepared to stay around to meet and greet audience members. Having dessert, drinks and/or coffee available only after the event is one way to encourage this.

Timing is Everything

- Many of my suggestions are meant to keep the event on time. Nobody likes a program that goes over and cuts into networking time. Both the moderator and program organizers can help make sure the event stays on schedule.
- People can only sit so long. I recommend no more than 40 minutes for the panel discussion leaving 20 minutes for audience questions (30 if discussion is lively). Next time you are at a talk and the speaker goes over 1 hour, watch what happens to the attention of the audience - phones come out, postures shift, they are checking out.
- If you can, plant 1-2 good questions with trusted audience members. A good first question is a model for the questions that follow and gets things rolling. It can make or break the discussion section.
- And what about those audience members that want to take over? It is the moderator’s job to politely but firmly get them to stop talking and redirect the conversation. The person you cut off might be miffed but the other 200 audience members will thank you. Own it.