

Tips for Moderators

A survey conducted by Beldam Entertainment, a conference management company based in New York City, revealed that moderators are not doing as good a job as they could to ensure successful panels at conferences and meetings.

Of the surveyed 393 respondents, 45 percent said at least one moderator in most events could not control his sessions, and only 56 percent found that moderators asked provocative questions. Survey participants were senior vice presidents or higher who had attended at least four business conferences in the previous 12 months.¹

Even though a well-known panel speaker will tend to draw in attendees, how the moderator steers the session will determine whether audience attention is held and what the audience takes away. The success with which a moderator does his or her job changes the energy in the room, the flow of the session, and the content that emerges. Good moderators make the panelists better, draw out the most interesting information, and keep listeners engaged. Bad ones squelch their panelists' potential and lose their audience.

As a moderator for a Texas Heart Institute continuing medical education symposium, you have special responsibilities to ensure the success of the activity. Often the success of a session depends on the moderator's ability to handle it smoothly. The professional polish a moderator provides in conducting a session greatly reinforces the content, message and value of a presentation.

Preparing the Speakers

All speakers participating in a Texas Heart Institute activity have been informed of the date, time and location of the presentation by the Office of Continuing Medical Education. As a moderator for a session, you might want to communicate this information to the speakers as well, to make certain it has been received and understood.

If you are moderating a panel, be sure to research the topics being discussed and prepare provocative questions. Talk to the panelist at some length before the event. This will enable you to play to the panelists' strengths and create a comfort level and warmth that are palpable to an audience. Learn to be a critical listener. Rather than think ahead, listen to what the panelists say and tie it to subsequent questions.

From the first, it is important for you to be precise and firm with the speakers about the amount of time allocated to their talks. While most speakers will try to comply with the time limits, few are aware of their pace when actually presenting. Therefore, you need to have a technique in mind for keeping the session on schedule.

¹ Airoidi, Donna, "Moderators key to successful conference panels," *Meeting News*. April 5, 2004.

Introducing Speakers

Moderators prepare the audience to listen by first introducing the session and its purpose. Next, they introduce all speakers. Many moderators also play a role as speaker. If this is the case, introduce the moderator/speaker as both at the start of a session to avoid confusing the audience. Introductions should be informative but brief, warm but professional. Attempt to make all introductions similar. To assist you, the Office of Continuing Medical Education will provide you with a brief biography of each speaker.

Time Schedules for Sessions

All sessions should have time for discussion, usually 15 to 20 minutes. As good as a presentation may be, audiences become frustrated and lose concentration if they are not permitted to interact with presenters. A 15-20 minute discussion can be broken up throughout the session. However, if this method is used, keep time carefully to accommodate both speakers and audience.

When a Speaker Runs Over Time

Speakers talking beyond the time limits of their presentations is a common problem. It is discourteous to other speakers and creates problems for the entire symposium schedule. Learn how to interrupt forcefully but respectfully. Successful moderators are able to cut off a panelist who is going on too long or not answering the questions.

Finding a diplomatic way of ending an overly long presentation is a challenge. Some helpful tips are:

- Alert speakers to time limits. During the planning stages, alert the speakers to the fact that all time limits will be strictly observed.
- Remind speakers before the session begins of their time limits. Tell the speakers clearly that you will signal them as they come to the end of their time limits.
- Use a technique for alerting the speaker when he/she is coming to the end of the time limit. For example, one or two minutes before the end of the talk, call "time" softly to the speaker; pass a note with the remaining time written on it; or tap a pencil. Sometimes an electric timer is provided for the speaker indicating a yellow caution light 2 minutes before the end of the talk.
- To end the presentation, use other techniques such as standing, walking toward the speaker, and politely interrupting the speaker. Use approaches that are comfortable to you.
- When a speaker is a flagrant violator of the time, it is appropriate to tell the speaker (after all, do future audiences have to suffer?). After the session, you

should tell the speaker in private about the problem, calmly, firmly, and politely (although you may feel none of the above at the time).

Handling Questions

Learn how and when it is appropriate to draw the audience into compelling discussion. Some situations lend themselves to audience participation, while in others a discussion derails the flow of the discussion.

Questions can be asked in two different ways. You may choose to pass out question forms or notecards to the audience. A symposium staff member will circulate through the audience and collect the questions. These will be passed to you as the moderator. This process helps make the Q & A more focused so that more questions can be answered.

Questions can also be asked from the floor. If this is the method you choose, repeat the question for the entire audience to hear. If questions are unfocused or unclear, you may want to rephrase them for the speaker. Remember to be as firm with the audience as you are with the speakers in terms of time limits. You should warn the audience when a session is drawing to a close, and close the session promptly if another session is scheduled after it. You can invite the audience to follow-up with the speaker during the breaks if appropriate.

Announcements

Announcements are annoying, but often necessary features of a symposium. Read the announcement efficiently and alert the audience to handouts, evaluation forms, CME certificates, places to deposit forms, and other details as necessary.

Closing a Session

As a moderator, you can conclude the session with a short thank you to all the speakers. If discussion was cut short, extend an invitation to the audience to adjourn to the hallway or adjoining room where additional discussion can take place. It is important for you to leave the room promptly when another session is scheduled immediately after yours.

Adapted from the American Planning Association Moderator's Guide 2004.