

How to Debate in the Modern Day?

“Creating a Modern Day ‘Lincoln-Douglas’ – And Why Getting it Right Drives Success!”



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By Dan Sims
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How Understanding a Few Crucial Tips Can Sometimes Make a Huge Difference



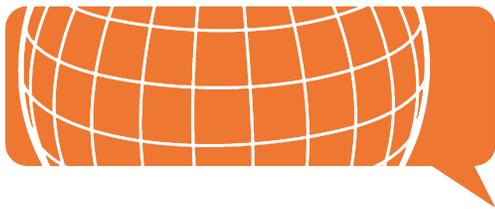
Nelson Mandela once said,

“A good leader can engage in a debate frankly and thoroughly, knowing that at the end he and the other side must be closer, and thus emerge stronger. You don't have that idea when you are arrogant, superficial, and uninformed.”

When done correctly, debate via civil discourse, intellectual dialogue, and informed perspective will often elevate outcomes for any audience. The key is to understand the criteria for which success will be measured. Having arranged hundreds of debate pairings for organizations – including leading trade associations, top colleges & universities, and multinational corporations – the desired outcomes are often as unique as the people involved.

To maximize event success, most organizations should consider one or more of the following for a debate program:

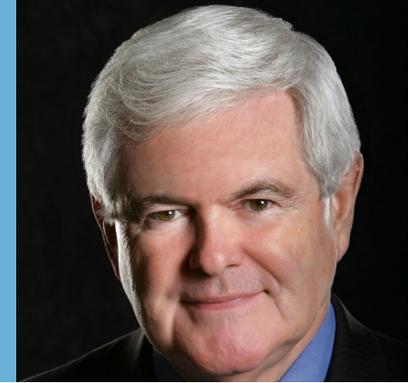
- ✓ **Appearance of Impartiality** – Politics is often a very sensitive subject both for individuals and certainly for organizations. While political leanings may in some cases be obvious, it is quite often not advantageous to only appear receptive to one perspective. A debate pairing provides organizations with a neutral political position while still providing their audience with key insights and takeaways.
- ✓ **Broad Perspective** – Intellectuals understand that learning occurs via discussion and exposure to new information and ideas. The best meeting planners create events whereby learning and increased awareness about a wide variety of issues are inherent audience benefits. A debate provides equal opportunity for opposing perspectives to lay forth a belief framework which supports a respective position. Whether an audience member is like-minded or not, the opportunity to receive a contrarian opinion from an expert is sometimes learning at its best.
- ✓ **Moderators Matter** – whether you source internally or seek a professional to balance an all-star lineup, moderators matter. These experts help to maintain impartiality, balance speaker times, and know precisely when to re-phrase questions or to further a good discussion. Considering a good moderator is a must.
- ✓ **It's Just More Fun** – Whether the goal is to create a good ole' fashioned spirited 'dinner table' debate, or to provide a highly refined and intellectual discourse, one certainty is that the conversation be entertaining. The simple construction of a point-counterpoint dialogue provides for innuendo, off-the-cuff insights, and very often the kind of intellectual sparring that only comes when someone is challenged. Some of the most legendary quotes in history were unscripted responses to debate opponent's quip.



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WWSG Exclusive Newt Gingrich shared with me:

“Great debates offer clear choices, solid facts, clarity of reasoning and an appeal to both the audiences’ heart and mind. The Lincoln-Douglas debates are the classic example of this kind of debate.”



I have been proud to represent one of the most respected and accomplished debaters of our time, The Honorable Newt Gingrich. Newt’s storied career includes a very successful time as Speaker of the US House of Representatives, a US Presidential run, a multitude of media roles

including as co-host of CNN’s Crossfire, and 26 books including 14 NY Times best-sellers. To say he knows a thing or two about debates is an understatement. Newt shared “Great debates offer clear choices, solid facts, clarity of reasoning and an appeal to both the audiences’ heart and mind. The Lincoln-Douglas debates are the classic example of this kind of debate.”

Once a debate format and the ‘success’ outcomes have been determined, the real work begins. Meeting planners will often undervalue the criticality of the process for properly selecting debate partners and will make one of three major mistakes:

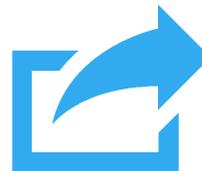
- ✓ **Predetermine Participants** – In some cases, planners will predetermine one of the debate participants and will pair them with someone clearly not of equal stature or reputation. Audiences resent a lopsided lineup, even if they agree with the more dominant personality.
- ✓ **Fame over Qualifications** - Other times, a planner will simply book a very well-known person from each side of the aisle, without consideration for their specific relationship with each other. The best debates require, at the very least, that participants have a good rapport with one another. Ideally, participants will have a healthy camaraderie and respect for each other which leads to much more entertaining dialogue.

- ✓ **Ignoring Charisma or Charm** – Lastly, very often planners select debate participants solely based on expertise, overlooking qualities including charisma, wit and charm. Unquestionably, debaters must have command of their subject matter, but debate “magic” can only unveil itself via the nuance and unscripted ad-libbing in ‘the moment’.

The Richmond Forum, one of the country’s longest-lasting and most respected public lecture forums, routinely hosts many of the most distinguished people in the world including US and global political leaders, celebrities and athletes. A recent panel discussion featured human rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Muslim-West Relations Advocate Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, and former terrorist leader Maajid Nawaz – all on the same stage. Richmond Forum Executive Director Bill Chapman offered the following, “We live in an ever-changing world where chaos, paradigm shifts, and conflict are normal. Our attendees want an unfiltered perspective from the people making the news. Whether they agree or not with a speaker’s opinion is not important, rather it is the conversation itself which fosters growth. Pairing Ayaan and Maajid together created a ‘living laboratory’ in which our attendees gained exposure and insight in a way not accessible otherwise. The event was a huge success.”

Each of these mistakes can be mitigated by working with a speaker’s bureau that understands, on an intimate level, the available pool of ‘candidates’. Like a fine wine, the best debate pairings will often mean different things to different people - intellectual, fearless, relevant, articulate and entertaining. As Mr. Mandela infers in his quote above, a well-crafted debate will ultimately lead to something unpredictable, yet more than was possible alone.

- Dan Sims, Principal of Worldwide Speaker Group



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LEADERS ARE SAYING**