8 Tips for Moderating a Panel Discussion

Since the start of this election cycle, we've all seen several debates between various party candidates leading to the current slate of Presidential and Vice Presidential debates. One crucial figure that sometimes gets overlooked in these debates is the moderator.

Whether it is part of a debate or panel discussion, moderators ostensibly are tasked with overseeing and facilitating a conversation — without overtly contributing their opinion or being a central part of the dialogue. They ask questions, solicit audience feedback, keep an eye on how much time remains and try and keep the conversation balanced between all panelists and experts. They're essentially the ringmasters, keeping dialogue moving and emphasizing major points.

While this may seem like an easy task, the truth is that the moderator often has the hardest job on the panel. It requires strong listening and comprehension skills, patience, and focus. Here are a few tips to help when you take on the role of moderator in a panel discussion:

Know Everything About Panelists — and Your Audience

With any public speaking presentation, preparation is essential. In moderated panel discussions, this is doubly crucial, since it's the moderator's job to ask questions of panelists and demonstrate a depth of knowledge beyond what may be commonly known or understood. Audiences are looking for true insight into a panelist, so understanding their expectations can help you go deeper into a topic or a panelist's background to keep the conversation engaging.

Involve the Audience Early On

A panel discussion isn't just a conversation between experts. (If it were, it would take place privately.) To get your audience engaged, acknowledge them and start soliciting feedback almost as soon as the conversation begins. Ask questions that can be answered by applause to liven up the room. If something is particularly funny or unexpected, make a humorous comment to keep everyone involved in the conversation.
Go Off Script

While hours of preparation can help give you the skeleton of what will occur in your panel, be prepared to follow particularly fascinating conversational detours with your panelists. Use your prepared questions as an outline and follow up on surprising or unexpected insights that may arise naturally. Ask other panelists to respond to particularly salient or controversial points.

Keep It Balanced

As we've seen in the recent Presidential debates, strong personalities with differing world-views can often result in jockeying for attention during the conversation. Give your panelists equal speaking time and allow each a designated time to respond to a point that may have come up. Try to limit interruptions or interjections by politely, but firmly, reassuring panelists that they will be given time to respond later.

Facilitate the Conversation, Without Becoming Part of It

Moderators should avoid becoming too much of a part of the conversation. Even as a trusted subject-matter expert, your job in the panel is to oversee, not be featured. You are essentially taking on the role of a “presentation aid” to the panelists, soliciting their expertise and experience, while largely staying out of the way. Ask a question, and let your panelist expound on the answer. Don’t interject your opinions as part of the dialogue.

Know When to Cut It Off

While sometimes the magic is in an expert going into detail on a particular subject, your job as moderator also involves knowing when it's time to move on. Practice politely but definitively cutting off a panelist that is getting long-winded. Summarizing or redirecting to a different question or point is a good way of doing this without causing offense.
**Sit With Your Panelists**

Putting yourself on the same plane as your panelists can help them feel more at ease and make conversation more natural. Consider a seated panel with comfortable armchairs instead of a table, which can act as a barrier between the panel and the audience.

**Go Over the Details With Panelists Before You Begin**

From technical details (like how the microphones will work and where the cameras are, if any), to a general outline of the proceedings, taking a few minutes to walk through the details with your panel before you all take the stage can make them feel more comfortable. Discuss the timing and the goal of being articulate, short, and succinct in the answers. Point out the key members of technical support and reassure them that if there are any issues, they will be resolved quickly.

Effective moderators stimulate lively, insightful conversation while taking a comfortable backseat to the personalities audiences came to see. **Listen carefully, respond naturally, and take the temperature of the room** to help create an unforgettable panel discussion!