

How to Moderate a Lively Panel Discussion

Question: Why is it so difficult for many professionals to lead a panel discussion?

Adubato: Most people lack moderating skills. It's not

Adubato: This is a very common mistake made when planning a panel discussion. These remarks slow down the program and give the discussion a predictable feel.

Question: Without such introductory remarks, how do you kick things off?

Adubato: The person facilitating should begin with an opening question. He should let every panelist know that there will be enough time for them to give their big picture view of the topic. This keeps the moderator in control and able to create an interactive environment.

Question: What are some other tips for a successful panel discussion?

Adubato: First, shorter is better. Short, to the point questions are usually best. Longer questions require longer answers. Then, there is the follow-up. One of my favorite moderating techniques is to follow a panelist's comments with such questions as, "Do you agree with your colleague?" or "Give us an example."

Question: Should the panelists be encouraged to speak with one another?

Adubato: Absolutely. As the moderator, you want to try to get panelists to talk directly to each other. This isn't easy because many experts are used to talking past fellow panelists and at the audience. An effective tool is to say to a panelist, "Mary, talk to Jim. Tell him what he might be missing." Also, don't forget about the audience. Get it involved early. If you're planning audience participation, wait no longer than 20 or 30 minutes before bringing in the audience. The longer you wait, the harder it is to get the audience involved.

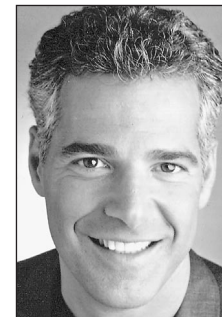
Question: Is it a good idea to have microphones set up in the audience for people to speak into?

Adubato: This approach can backfire. If you have audience members lining up at microphones, it hinders on the spot follow-up from people who feel strongly about the topic and aren't next in line. An alternative is to have assistants moving around the audience looking for people who want to ask a question.

Question: How does the moderator effectively wrap-up the discussion?

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Adubato: Allow for final comments. Give each panelist a minute or two to respond to a final big-picture question. Some options: "Are you optimistic about the future? Where do you think we will be in five years? What one point or theme should we take from this conference?" Then, thank each panelist, the conference organizers and the audience members for their participation.

The Bottom Line: A panel facilitator must take nothing for granted. Effective preparation and practice will lead to a successful event. ♦