

13 Tips for Hosting Perfect Panels

By Ellen Dunnigan

So you're going to moderate a panel, congratulations! Your job is easy, right? Just show up and read the questions and smile a lot, right? Hold on, not so fast, the success of this event rests squarely on your shoulders.

Everyone wants their panel discussion to be engaging and innovative, and more often than not these events are dull and dry—even with bright panelists and intriguing questions. Like all great events, panels require preparation, planning, and a healthy dose of performance.

As the panel facilitator (or as the moderator, or event host) your functions are three-fold: **create and prepare a stellar panel, arrange a conducive environment, and be the perfect host.** What follows below are the thirteen responsibilities within these three categories. Take care of these thirteen and your event will be the talk of the town, or at least your industry, for a very long time.

Create and Prepare Your Stellar Panel

We need to dispel that frustrating misconception floating around that panelists should not know their questions ahead of time. Successful panels have an interesting characteristic in common: Everyone prepares for their part! When you strategically select your panelists and allow everyone the opportunity to plan their thoughts and speaking parts intentionally, the panel discussion will be clear and focused, and the audience will hear—and firmly grasp—the talking points as they were intended.

1. **Choose the panelists strategically.** Great panelists have depth of knowledge (their specific content), are passionate, and present well. This means they're interesting, stay on topic, are comfortable speaking in front of an audience, and don't show signs of distress (e.g., sweat, choke up, lose their voice, or fidget). They look prepared and organized in their thoughts, and, yes, sometimes they're quite opinionated and passionate.
2. **Arrange your questions.** This is the "obvious" one, and it still bears repeating. Considering the order and flow of the questions you want to ask ensures that you'll cover all the main points of your panel theme. Doing your own homework helps your panelists prepare, too. Ask your panelists what questions they think should be asked.
3. **Schedule individual meetings.** Once you have your talking points mapped out, you'll need to meet or talk with each panelist individually. These individual meetings ideally should occur at least two weeks prior to your event. After all, you're not trying to stump or surprise the panelists—you want to showcase their expertise. Use this time to learn what they want their own specific talking points to be, in relation to your questions. Be sure to clarify as needed by posing questions like, "What are the one or two key points the audience needs to get from their time with you?"
4. **Advise the panel.** When you have notes from all your panelists, summarize briefly with each person what the other panelists will be speaking about. This helps cross-check your own outline and confirms that your panelists won't be trying to cover the same key points. Your panelists will be thrilled to know that their co-presenters are prepared, and will be curious to learn what "hot issues" will be triggered.

Arrange a Conducive Environment — Set the Stage

Preparing your panelists isn't the only secret to a successful event. The ambiance of your discussion room demands special arrangement as well. Your panel environment needs to exude professionalism, just like your panel members. Here are our best tips for the perfect panel set-up:

1. **Seat panelists in a wide “half-moon” (concave) shape.** This shape allows your panelists to see each other, making for better interaction throughout the discussion.
2. **Use normal-height chairs with arms.** Comfortable chairs that are easy to get into and out of ensures no “short skirt” or mobility issues for your panelists. Think “barrel” or “club” chairs, upholstered or leather. Consider a short table between each chair for bottled water and notes.
3. **Put your facilitator at a podium.** This gives you, or your emcee, something to lean on while talking. Situate the podium at an angle to the left or right of the panel so that the moderator can see both the panelists and the audience. Doing so allows the moderator to catch the facial expressions of other panelists who are indicating that they have something to say.
4. **Mic all speakers.** Keep your event streamlined and the audio in-check with this technical detail. There’s no need to pass a microphone around, it just looks clumsy.
5. **Light’em Up.** Many hotel conference rooms have poor lighting or mood lighting that does not put the speakers in focus. Request that the platform or stage for the speakers have bright enough lighting on the speakers so that they can be seen without shadows.

Be the perfect, facilitative host

If you’ve prepped your panelists and you know the stage will look professional and polished, you’re mostly there. To really make the most of your big event, take time to review the final requirements for a winning panel discussion—the facilitator tips.

1. **Open with a well-prepared statement.** Introduce the panel and talk about the two to three key reasons for today’s discussion. These opening remarks are vital, as they set the tone for the entire event and provide context for the discussion.
2. **Watch facial expressions.** Be sure to “listen” with your eyes as well as your ears. Observe the panelists who are not speaking and watch for those tell-tale signs that another panelist wants to jump in on the topic. Whether another panelist expresses a look of keen interest or of a “difference of opinion,” ask him or her a follow-up question. Inviting your panelists’ opinions when they’re really eager to say something—that’s what keeps the conversation interesting.
3. **Use comment cards for the Q&A.** Successful panels tend to steer away from using a mic to ask questions. (It’s not usually best to give control away to an unknown audience member.) If you want to have a Q&A section, simply make the audience aware of the Q&A cards at the beginning of the panel discussion, and then encourage them to write down their questions as the discussion progresses. About 10-15 minutes prior to your Q&A segment, announce that their cards will be collected. That way, you’ll have enough time to sort through the inquiries and ask the most intriguing (and rational) questions to your panel.
4. **Summarize the key takeaways.** Close your panel event with interest and excitement by recapping the discussion for your audience. This plays better than merely having it close with the last audience-asked question (especially if it’s a dud). Remind your audience of the key take-aways and lessons learned. Wrap up the conversation and thank the audience and the panel for their engagement.

Thirteen steps to perfectly produced panels. Take the time to prepare for your dynamic discussion and watch the magic happen!

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