



Mastering the Role of Moderator

04/18/2011

by [Karen DiPrima](#), communications manager at Flaster/Greenberg PC and member of PRSA Philly News Committee

Back in the day, variety shows were a staple of early television programming. The standard lineup of entertainers often included a juggler or an acrobat (and sometimes, a juggling acrobat!), who wowed the audience with feats that defied gravity. Although it may have looked easy, those effortless results required balance, timing and focus. One false move and — well, you know.

Moderating a panel discussion can be as daunting a task as spinning plates on poles, but it absolutely is a skill that belongs in the PR practitioner's bag of tricks. Developing ability as a moderator will serve to increase your confidence in public speaking, hone your active listening skills, and sharpen your interview technique, not to mention increase your poise under fire (press conference, anyone?).

Your challenge as the moderator is to control an array of elements occurring simultaneously, with disaster lurking if any one of them goes awry. But the rewards are worth the risk. The key is to understand your role, and to know how to interact appropriately with the panel and the audience. Following are a few basics that may help:

Know Your Role

The moderator's function is to facilitate and direct the conversation in order to elicit information, provoke thought and engage the audience. The moderator must make sure that each panelist has the opportunity to contribute equally, and that no individual member dominates the panel. Additionally, the moderator must continually assess and react to the audience, whether to clarify points, adjust the pace of the conversation, or redirect the discussion, as necessary. Most importantly, the moderator must be focused and listen actively, in order to keep the conversation on track, pose relevant follow-up questions, and smoothly transition to new topics.

Tips:

- Keep your personal opinions and anecdotes to a minimum.
- Let the panelists do the talking.

- Go with the flow of the discussion, but maintain focus. Know when to redirect the conversation and when to pursue an interesting digression from the main topic.
- Listen actively; keep alert to the mood of the audience and react accordingly.

Respect the Panel

Presumably, the moderator and the panelists share the common ground of knowledge about a particular subject. Make no mistake, however; the panelists are the stars of the show. It is your responsibility to help them shine, starting with your introductions. To make sure you are positioning them well before the audience, ask the panelists to provide you a brief bio to use during introductions. Once received, circulate the bios (including your own), to all panel members. They will appreciate it, especially if their fellow panelists are unknown to them.

If possible, try to convene the panel members prior to the event so that they can become better acquainted with each other and with you. At a minimum, forward the list of discussion topics and questions several weeks in advance, and solicit the panelists' input. Especially, determine if any subject matter is off-limits or if there are questions the panelists would prefer *not* to answer. Inform them of the format of the program, the number and demographics of the audience, and any other information they may need or want to know about the event.

Tips:

- Promote familiarity and a comfort level among the panelists by circulating their bios and attempting a conference call to discuss the program format and list of questions.
- Try to stick to the questions your panelists are expecting, but don't be afraid to ask an off-the-cuff question if it is relevant. Make sure, however, that impromptu questions are not problematic for your panelists, would not embarrass them, and would not detract from your overall objectives for the event.
- Do not ask the panelists hardball questions that have not been circulated to them beforehand, but do prepare for the possibility of a difficult question from the audience and develop an adequate response.

Respect the Audience

Audiences enjoy panel discussions for many reasons: they are generally friendly, more relaxed programs that can convey a lot of information, and from which insights can be gleaned that do not come across in a less interactive setting. In addition, the varying viewpoints of the panel members usually make for an entertaining and lively program. So while location and food are important, no matter the venue or the menu, the biggest draws for the audience will be the topics of discussion and the panelists themselves.

The audience will look to you, the moderator, to set the stage by explaining the format of the program and defining the discussion topics, as well as introducing the panelists, asking the questions, and lingering with a discussion thread or moving on when necessary. Audience members will also depend upon you to clarify responses and questions to and from the panelists or the audience, to summarize important points, pursue interesting lines of discussion and most of all, to keep the flow of information continuous. Not to mention starting and finishing on time.

Tips:

- If the audience has submitted questions in advance, try to include them in your list for the program, making sure to review them with the panel members in advance.
- Explain the format of the program right after the introductions. Make it clear to the audience (and remind the panel) whether questions should be saved for the end or are encouraged throughout the program.
- Before moving on to another topic, summarize points made previously, as discussion threads can easily become convoluted. The audience will appreciate your bringing them back to the core question.

Summary

As we've seen, the moderator is both a panel member and an outsider; the individual in charge and the one behind the scenes; the referee as well as the instigator. This delicate balancing act takes practice, but when well executed, the role of moderator can be exhilarating, and can prove a valuable asset to PR practitioners.