

**Patricia FRIPP**

# How to Moderate a Panel **EFFECTIVELY**

**Expert Advice**

*Frippicism: "A panel can be stimulating or dull. Plan for success."*



# How to Moderate a Panel Effectively - Expert Advice

*Congratulations!* You have been asked to moderate a panel. This is a great opportunity to build your reputation and add value for your audience. For many, however, moderating a panel can be more challenging than delivering a keynote speech.

As you probably realize, as a panel moderator, you have multiple responsibilities. You are the glue that keeps the panelists together and makes them look good. You must set the tone in a way that raises the audience's expectations. Then you must keep the discussion lively, engaging, perhaps controversial, and moving along well. As you know from your own experience, a panel can be either boring or engaging.

## **The following 13 strategies can help you be a rousing success:**

### ***1. Know your audience.***

What are your audience's key interests, needs, and concerns? What is it about the panel that attracts them? What questions are they hoping to have answered? What will be the impact of the panelists' comments on their work and on their relationship with their customers, partners, and vendors?

This helps you prepare a discussion guide that captures the reason for having the panel and will keep the discussion relevant and meaningful for the audience.

### ***2. Allow sufficient time for advance preparation.***

You cannot just show up and wing it! Your preparation includes understanding the purpose of the panel; becoming updated on pertinent/controversial industry issues; researching and contacting your panelists; establishing panelist ground rules; writing your own introduction for whoever will introduce you, writing a script to set the tone for the event, and writing the introduction for each panelist. The introductions should be short and should include only the most important credentials from their bios. Verify the correct name pronunciation and title for each person and create a list of questions. Ask them how they would like to be introduced and how you should phrase your questions to lead into their answers. Make sure all panelists focus on a different area or point of view.

Include a sentence in each introduction explaining why they were chosen to be on the panel. Edit any prepared introduction they give you down to a few talking points on why they are a good choice to discuss this topic. For most business audiences, it is not relevant to include where they went to college, how many years they have been married, or how many children they have.

### ***3. Contact panel members early.***

They have been carefully selected. Just as if you were planning the ultimate dinner party, you need the right mix of expertise, the ability to express an opinion coherently, and divergent points of view.



Ask your panelists what they are most proud of, their favorite hobby, movie, or music. You want to get a snapshot of the person behind the credentials. You may want to add a comment about their nonprofessional side. Run your questions by them. Ask if there are specific areas of the subject that they feel passionate about or would like the opportunity to discuss.

Asking good questions will help you learn the panelists' points of view on the topic as well as information about their interests and backgrounds. Do not make the mistake many interviewers or moderators make by asking too many questions at once. Ask only one question at a time in as few words as possible. Look for diversity in backgrounds, opinions, and vested interests. Be cognizant of the hidden agenda they will each have for agreeing to be on the panel.

#### ***4. Prepare thoughtful and interesting questions.***

Prepare in advance open-ended questions that are both specific to each panelist's individual interests and representative of issues the audience will be interested in. Part of the art of moderation is the art of interviewing, and any interviewer will tell you that preparation is the key to asking the most interesting and provocative questions.

#### ***5. Rehearsal is mandatory.***

Schedule rehearsal time for the panel members via video conferencing. This helps establish chemistry between panelists. Share the results of your research into audience expectations. Lay out the time schedule and any other ground rules or guidelines they need to know. Review the room logistics and the time at which you expect them. If you can't get them all together beforehand, make sure you meet with them individually.

#### ***6. Warm up the crowd.***

If you have the opportunity, chat with the audience as they come in. Ask, "What specific questions would you like the panelists to answer?" "What interested you in our subject?" If your panelists are comfortable doing this with you, it is a great way to build rapport with the audience. When they see you have extended yourself to them, they are more likely to give you their attention.

#### ***7. Get set for success.***

Set the tone with your own introductory remarks. This could include why this discussion topic is important or a tie-in for the meeting theme. Then



explain why these panelists were selected. Once the panel is in session, be sure to introduce each person, especially if anyone is a last-minute substitute whose name won't be in the event program. Begin by asking them all to deliver a short presentation on their point of view on the subject. Your first question should not be too controversial, but you will want to raise the stakes later, probing into more controversial areas.

### **8. Listen carefully.**

While the panelists are talking, especially if there is a point when they deliver prepared remarks, listen very carefully and take notes. Whenever possible, capture important statements verbatim. Then use what you have heard to invite panelists to comment on other panelists' statements.

### **9. Keep an eye on time.**

Too many moderators let speakers ramble. On behalf of the audience, be prepared to navigate and intervene with panelists. Ask follow-up questions that get to the story behind the response. Ask, "Why do you believe this?" "Do we all agree with what Anthony just said?" Panels that are too general or full of platitudes tend to bore audiences; controversy keeps it interesting.

### **10. Add variety and flexibility.**

Rather than field every question yourself, allow the panelists to question each other. The audience will be interested in dialogue between panelists. Every single exchange does not need to start with a question from you. If you are allowing questions from the audience, establish simple systems that everyone can access. This could include an open mic in the aisle, note cards on which they can write questions passed to runners, or online systems for submitting questions.

### **11. Accept the reality.**

Be aware that audience members will be carrying smartphones and communicating about what they see and hear onstage on Twitter or other social networks while the event is in progress. When you hear a short, pithy quote, make sure to repeat it for the Tweepers, and mention the hashtag.

### **12. Let the audience know how to interact.**

If standing microphones are placed in the aisles, ask audience members to come to a microphone to ask their questions. A phrase that will serve you well is, "Many of you are experts. We value your opinions. In order for us to field as many questions as possible, please make your question short and specific, and direct it to only one panelist rather than to the whole panel."

### **13. Close the panel on a high point.**

End with a summary of the information and ask the audience to thank the panelists for their contribution. Your last words linger. Make sure they are interesting and that they reinforce the main theme of the panel.



## Delightful Experiences

The most enjoyable panels I have experienced include well-known panelists who know each other. One of the most memorable was when Bob Newhart and Don Rickels were being interviewed. The moderator had enough sense to sit back as the comedians interviewed each other and told stories of going on vacations together for years. It was not exactly as planned, but with seasoned performers, the moderator knew he could trust them and went with the flow.

On another occasion a San Francisco comedian and magician, Robert Strong, interviewed comedians Rich Little, Carol Channing, and a couple of their long-time friends, all of whom had known each other for decades. Strong also had the sense to sit back when, after asking one of them about appearing on the Ed Sullivan show, they kept reminding each other of more stories.

You may be thinking, “Our executives are not that comfortable,” or “Our industry topics and subjects are serious.” That may be true, but I promise you I have seen business panels add some “unplanned magic” to their events. This always happens when they are sitting on sofas rather than at the formal table.



## How to Begin Well: A Specific Example

In January, Mark, a district sales manager from a biotech company, was preparing to moderate a panel at the Las Vegas National Sales Meeting.

He was nervous with his new role in front of the 100-person audience. In our pre-coaching communications, I noticed his email signature line included a quote about “moving fast.” He explained that he had a new role and was “moving fast” to understand new products, clients, and products.

His panel’s task was to encourage the audience to embrace new jobs in different areas and to realize that they would have to move fast to get up to speed in different roles in new territories.

Mark did not have any idea how to set the tone for the meeting. I asked him, “What experience do you have with Las Vegas?” He said, “After last year’s sales meeting, my wife Tammy came in for the weekend. We went to see David Copperfield, and he made her disappear.”

Incorporating the 3 techniques made it easy for Mark to remember his script.

- Think chronologically
- Use shorter sentences or phrases.
- Consider each visual scene

Notice: I recommend that you write your script with one short sentence or phrase **going down** the page, **not across** as in a paragraph. In your rehearsal, this makes it easier for you to internalize the script.

“After last year’s sales meeting,

my wife Tammy came in for the weekend.

We went to see David Copperfield’s magic show.

Three quarters of the way through his performance,

Copperfield threw two dozen balls into the audience.

Tammy caught one.”

David said, “If you touched a ball, please come on the stage.”

He seated 24 people on bleachers and covered them with a tarp.

Whoosh! Five seconds later, they were gone!

Suddenly they appeared at the back of the room.

On the way out I asked Tammy, “How did he do it?”

She said, “We are sworn to secrecy. However, we did have to move really fast!”

Remember, the sales meeting was in Las Vegas, and Mark’s theme incorporated the importance of moving fast. He said, “The panel was a wild success, and everyone raved about my opening story!”

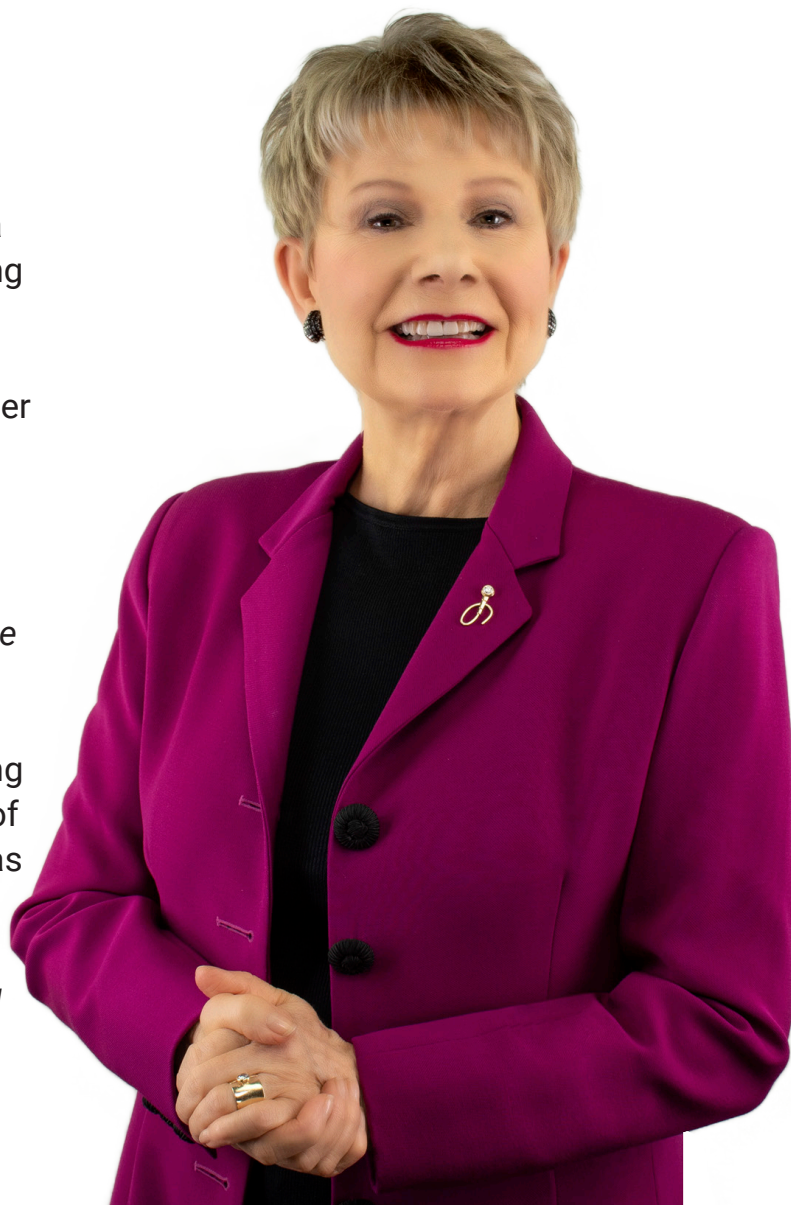


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**Patricia Fripp** is a Hall of Fame keynote speaker, executive speech coach, sales presentation skills consultant, and online learning expert.

In Ms. Fripp’s career, she has delivered over 3,500 presentations as well as hundreds of virtual presentations. Companies hire Patricia to help them drive more business by perfecting their sales conversations and presentations and by helping leaders inspire action and commitment through their words. Clients of her speech coaching include corporate leaders, technical and sales professionals, and seasoned professional speakers. Her innovative online learning platform *FrippVT Powerful, Persuasive Presentations* has users worldwide.

*Kiplinger’s Personal Finance* wrote that learning presentation skills from Patricia Fripp is one of the best ways to invest in you. In 2019 she was named “One of the Top 30 Women in Sales” and “One of the Top 30 Global Gurus.” She is the author of *How’s That Presentation Coming Along?* and coauthor of *Deliver Unforgettable Presentations*.



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