

MODERATOR'S GUIDE

Introduction

Moderators have a special job in public presentations. Often the success of a session hinges on the moderator's ability to handle it smoothly. While the work put into developing a session will determine its value, the professional polish a moderator provides in conducting the session greatly reinforces the content and message. This guide is for both new and experienced moderators. New moderators learn how to prepare for a session, and experienced moderators gain tips for anticipating and handling difficult or unexpected situations.

Many moderators also play a role as a speaker. If this is the case, the moderator should introduce him or herself as both at the start of a session to avoid confusing the audience.

GUIDELINES

Preparing Your Speakers

The moderator must prepare all speakers for the session, so that they understand clearly what is expected of them. Moderators must speak individually with each speaker about his or her own presentation in detail in order to understand how one presentation coordinates with the others. It is important for the moderator to let each speaker know what other speakers in the session are talking about.

While written correspondence is good for confirming details, telephone conversations are effective for resolving questions. Well prepared moderators will talk with speakers at least twice during the planning process. Sometimes the moderator completes the planning stage with a conference call among all speakers.

Speakers must be informed of the date, time and location of the public presentation. Even if another person is sending the speakers this information, a considerate moderator will communicate this material as well, to make certain it is received and understood. From the first, it is important for moderators to be precise and firm with speakers about the amount of time allocated to their presentations. While most speakers will try to comply with the time limits, few are aware of their pace when actually presenting. Therefore, moderators need to have a technique in mind for keeping the session on schedule.

Introducing Speakers

Moderators prepare the audience to listen by first introducing the session and its purpose. Next, he/she introduces all speakers. Moderators are provided with speaker biographies. In other circumstances, a moderator will gather this material ahead of time. Moderators should attempt to make all introductions similar. Introductions should be informative, brief, warm, but professional. Like most things, great introductions are an art form, so it's best to play safe and avoid using humor which may backfire (or come to haunt the hapless moderator at future public occasions).

Time Schedule for Sessions

All sessions must have time for discussion. If the session is 1 hour and 15 minutes, the presentations should take 1 hour and the discussion 15 minutes. As good as a presentation may be, audiences become frustrated and lose concentration if they are not permitted to interact with presenters. The 15 minutes of discussion can be broken up throughout the session. However, if this method is chosen, the moderator needs to keep time carefully to accommodate both speakers and audience.

When a Speaker Runs Over Time

Speakers talking beyond the time limits of their presentation is a common problem. Quite obviously, it is discourteous to other speakers and creates problems for the entire session schedule. If the problem is severe enough it may affect the next session as well. Finding a diplomatic way of ending an overly long presentation is a challenge.

Some tips which may help:

- during the planning stages alert the speakers to the fact that all time limits will be strictly observed. If a speaker has problems condensing information, offer to review the presentation and suggest ways it can be shortened
- before the session begins, remind the speakers of their time limits; tell the speakers clearly that you will signal them as they come to the end of their time
- use a technique to alert the speaker he/she is coming to the end of her/his time. For example, one or two minutes before the end of the talk (particularly if the talk does not seem to be winding down), call "time" softly to the speaker; pass him/her a slip with the remaining time written on it; or, tap a pencil
- use other techniques to end the presentation. Standing, walking toward the speaker, and even putting a hand over the microphone are trusty, (if somewhat obtrusive) techniques. Moderators should use approaches that are comfortable to them.
- when a speaker was a flagrant violator of the time, it is appropriate to tell him/her (after all do future audiences have to suffer?). After the session, the moderator should tell the speaker in private about the problem, calmly, firmly, and politely (although the moderator may feel none of above at the time).

Encourage Use of Visual Aids

Studies have shown that even attentive audiences retain very little of what they see in a presentation. They retain even less of what they merely hear! But, the retention rate for what they both see and hear can be phenomenal. The lesson is clear: encourage speakers to use visual aids for emphasis and lasting effect of their presentation. Something as simple as a brief quote, a diagram, or a form can add immeasurably to the educational soundness of a presentation. However, discourage use of pages from a book or small type script; one cannot read that much, let alone be able to see it.

There is a wide variety of technology available to enhance a presentation. Most speakers use PowerPoint presentations which can be pre-loaded onto the computer to be used in a particular room according to the schedule of presentations. Overhead projectors are provided for those who prefer to use them, and also as backup to a computer malfunction. Check with your speakers to be certain they have mastered the equipment and its quirks, and make certain they can keep a presentation going smoothly even when AV problems crop up. If there is a Speaker Prep Room it

can be used to rehearse a presentation, get familiar with the AV equipment, or to meet with your presenters.

Preparing the Session Room

Although officially it is not the moderator's responsibility to solve technical problems, such as lighting, sound systems, etc., a well prepared moderator will want to master these skills as well. When the moderator arrives at the conference, workshop or meeting, he/she should determine who are the technical support staff and where they are found if needed during the session. Knowing this information can save time should an emergency arise.

If possible, 15 minutes prior to the start of the session, the moderator should survey the room. The moderator will want to run through a checklist of items:

- **LIGHTS:** where are the light switches and how are the lights raised and lowered; if the switch is not close to where the moderator will be, recruit someone to sit near the switch and handle the lights
- **EQUIPMENT:** where is the audio-visual equipment and is it the right kind; is the AV equipment in the right location for this session; does the equipment work properly
- **LEVEL OF LIGHT:** if projection is used can the lights be dimmed enough and can daylight be effectively shut out; when the lights are dimmed, can the speakers still read their notes; does the podium light work
- **MICROPHONES:** do the microphones work properly; how are the microphones turned on and off; how are they adjusted
- **HANDOUTS:** have the speaker hand-outs arrived; is there a convenient place to put hand-outs, or is someone available to hand them out.

Announcements

Announcements are an annoying, but often necessary feature of sessions. Moderators should read the announcements and alert the audience to hand-outs, evaluation forms (if they exist) and places to deposit forms or get additional materials

Handling Questions

As speakers are asked questions, the moderator or speaker should always repeat the question for the entire audience to hear. Repeating the questions is essential in sessions that are taped. If questions seem unfocused or unclear, the moderator may wish to rephrase them for the speaker. Occasionally, an audience member is only trying to make a point. In that case, she/he isn't asking a question and no response is necessary. Remember, the moderator needs to be as firm with the audience as with speakers in terms of time limits. The moderator should warn the audience when a session is drawing to a close, and close the session promptly if another session is scheduled after it. The moderator can invite the audience to follow up with personal questions.

Closing Remarks

Moderators can conclude a session with a short thank you to all the speakers. If discussion was cut short, an invitation is extended to the audience to adjourn to stay in the room, where additional discussion can take place.

Adapted from American Planning Association's 2002 Moderator's Guide.

<http://www.planning.org/2002conference/moderatorsguide.htm>