23 TIPS FOR PANEL PRESENTATIONS

Panels include a variety of formats. Typically everyone has researched a similar topic, and during the discussion each shares his/her perspective. Sometimes everyone does an independent commentary and then discussion occurs in intra-panel discussion. Sometimes the topic is simply presented and people participate spontaneously. At the end of the formal panel discussion, often audience members are invited to comment or ask questions generally or aim questions specifically to individual panelists. The suggestions below are intended to cover the formats above.

1. Audience members are aware of panelists even before the formal panel begins. If possible smile or greet people. Be welcoming as audience members catch your eye. Your demeanor should generate warmth rather than being perceived as distracted, impersonal, neutral, or even aloof.

2. As other panelists are talking, some eyes in the audience will drift back and forth toward you. You need to appear engaged in listening, watching the speaker with some facial expression. Looking down or at your own notes may leave others with the impression that you are disengaged. Nod and show facial expressions that indicate you are listening. Remember, even though you aren’t talking, you are still “on.”

3. Use names of panelists whenever possible, and remember to thank whoever it is who introduces you.

4. If you decide to comment on what another panelist has said, try to rehearse your comments in your mind prior to speaking. It is best to begin with a reference to the previous speaker’s comment before giving your own, a transitional comment from the previous comments to yours.

5. Even though this is a scholarly event, you are being watched, and you want people to remain interested in both you and the other panelists. As you speak attempt to include the audience, look out at them, and don’t be afraid to connect visually with individuals.

6. Under no conditions should you read your comments. Although it will take more time, you should have rehearsed them from bullet points often enough so that all you have before you is an outline.

7. Solid well researched content and organization are critical. Carefully arrange your bullet points so that listeners can follow the logic and reasoning. Having the “art/style/form” of being a panelist is no substitute for reasoned content, the primary goal and purpose of presenting.

8. The rate of your speech should be slower than ordinary conversation. This takes some practice. Speaking s-l-o-w-l-y creates inferences among the audience that you are not anxious to get it over with, that you have high self-esteem, and that you believe that what you have to say is important enough not to be rushed.

9. If you have power-point slides, you need to know them well enough so that you can keep your eyes on the audience as you discuss them. Try never to turn your back on the audience or other panelists.

10. If you are discussing a study you conducted, there is a typical format: purpose, method, results, conclusion/discussion plus comments on how subsequent studies might learn from any weaknesses in yours. Organization of your thoughts is important. While the audience may remember much of what you say if it isn’t tightly organized, they take the comments more seriously and ascribe higher credibility to the speaker when they are.
11. The way you look is itself a vehicle of communication. Do whatever it takes to present yourself as professional: hair, shoes, teeth, clothes, etc.

12. Vocal and facial variation add interest and give the impression of speaker enthusiasm.

13. Diction should be attended to: Words such as can, picture, going to want to, for are often uttered incorrectly. While poor diction is ubiquitous in ordinary conversation and often goes unnoticed, sloppy diction does make an impression in a public forum. You distinguish yourself when you pronounce your words crisply, clearly, and correctly.

14. Vocalized pauses such as umm, okay, and you know, should not occur. No utterances between thought units.

15. Once the panel is open to audience questions, when one is directed to you, paraphrase the question so that everyone in the audience understands it and the questioner is able to verify that you understand it as s/he intended.

16. Whenever possible attempt to give a confirming comment to the questioner. “Thank you for the question” or “I am glad you asked that”. By confirming rather than just answering, you reinforce others who may want to ask a question and, at the same time, promote an image of yourself as approachable and empathetic.

17. If a portion of the panel discussion includes intrapanel discussion, there are valuable contributions you can make in addition to adding your own content. For example you can summarize so that everyone understands. You can clarify if there is any doubt about what is being said. You can harmonize if there is disagreement. See attached sheet for additional suggestions.

18. Keep a notepad of any thoughts sparked in you as a result of what the others are saying. Then during the intrapanel discussion, you will have the data from which to comment.

19. Think critically as you listen to what others are claiming. Is the reasoning faulty; are there generalizations or inferences being presented as facts? At the appropriate time diplomatically point out flaws.

20. Monitor both the quantity and quality of your interjections. Less is often more. Repeating oneself becomes tedious to listeners. Clarify important points with examples and anecdotes. If there is significant additional information related to your topic, bring handouts and have them available for the audience members rather than attempting to cover too much in a limited time period.

21. Finally look like you are enjoying the opportunity to participate in a public panel. Actually “enjoying” the experience is much more likely when the panelist has prepared thoroughly and knows material well enough to concentrate on making it clear to others during his/her time to discuss.

22. The way you manage the technology is ultimately a reflection of your own credibility. Laptops should be set up ahead of time. Prior to the presentation technology should be checked and used in rehearsal, making sure any streaming video or audio works, PowerPoint slides are timed, etc.

23. Verify prior to the panel discussion what the time limits for each panelist are and know what warning signal or time limits cues the moderator intends to use. If the warning is given, you are expected to “wrap it up” promptly, and you will be disappointed if you hadn’t made all the points you intended.