

How to Be a Great Panelist at SXSW (or Any Other Conference)

Let your expertise shine in the panelist seat

By Joel Schwartzberg – March 12, 2012



A conference panel may seem like something you can “wing” — after all, how tough is it to sit and field questions about what you know best? But succeeding in front of a large crowd is actually much more complicated than just standing up and giving a speech.

Consider the moving parts: getting your key points in; interacting with panelists, the moderator and the audience; responding to live questions; appearing both

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knowledgeable and open to ideas; and carefully straddling that line between saying too much and too little. It can make for a very fretful experience, and seeming anxious is the last thing you want, especially when your fellow experts are as cool as pickles. Fear not. Below, presentation experts offer their advice for holding your own when you take one of those seats on stage.

Do Your Homework

“Many people think they can just wing it — I’ve seen it a hundred times — but it’s important to do your homework,” said author and frequent panelist Nicole Williams, founder and CEO of the career website WORKS by Nicole Williams. She encourages panelists to “research the group and the conference and gear your comments to what’s most beneficial for them.” You can get information from the conference’s website or official program.

But your research shouldn’t stop at the conference itself. Get to know your neighbors, as well. “Look [the panelists] up on LinkedIn and see what groups and organizations they’re part of,” she advised. “Find other interviews they’ve given.” What they’ve said before is often a good indication of what they’ll say again.

Christine Auten, who produces sessions for this year’s South-by-Southwest (SXSW), encourages participants to check in early with fellow panelists and the moderator “to understand what your contribution to the topic should be.” This will help avoid surprises and correct misunderstandings (like your title, for example) before you put yourself out there.

It might also give you more to say. “Referencing the organization’s own research is always a winner, as is referencing the moderator’s work,” said consultant Joan Bryna Michelson, frequent panelist and president of JB Michelson & Associates.

Bottom line: By the time you sit down, the only strangers should be in front of you.

Get Interactive

If audiences wanted speakers who take turns, they’d watch a spelling bee. Seasoned conference audiences expect and want spontaneous interactions among panelists to create something close to a live environment. These interactions should be collegial, even friendly. “Engage the other panelists and the audience as if you were at a dinner party with casual, real conversation,” said Thomas Ripley of Gettles/Ripley, which organizes [Digital Hollywood Content Summit](#). (Full disclosure: I’m moderating a panel there myself.)

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Presentation specialist Debbie Fay, of Bespeak Presentation Solutions, agreed. “If another presenter says something interesting, you should be able to weigh in,” she said. “The more you bounce off one another, the more interesting it will be for your audience.”

But how and when do you bounce? First, be agreeable to disagreeing. “Healthy dissent makes for stimulating conversation,” said Jonathan Rick, director of Levick Strategic Communications.

Professional speaking coach Martha Denton also offered this tip. “If disagreeing, frame it kindly: ‘I see your point, but I don’t agree for the following reasons.’ If agreeing with someone, don’t repeat what they already said — add to it.” (Like she just did.)

But don’t just agree or disagree for the sake of saying something. Audiences want real, original points, stressed consultant Marty Fahncke, president of FawnKey & Associates: “If you don’t have something of true value to add, just wait for the next question or topic.” Fahncke offered this famous quote: “When two men in business always agree, one of them is unnecessary.”

Keep Your Focus

Your panel has been given a specific subject — stick to it. “Attendees will be expecting your session to cover the topic promised in the session title and description,” Auten tells her SXSW speakers. “Try to fulfill that promise by staying on topic.”

But also stick to only what you know. “You’d be amazed how many panelists turn up to a discussion sure that they’ll be able to cope because they know their subject in general,” said Dr. Simon Raybould of Curved Vision, a UK-based presentation coaching service. “Panels aren’t about ‘in general’; they’re about ‘in particular.’ Make sure you dig up the necessary details.”

Jane McDonnell, executive director of the Online News Association, which runs a successful annual conference, agreed. “Know what you’re talking about. A lot of presentations fail right here long before the projector is set up,” she says. “You need to have ‘been there, done that’ to be an effective, helpful speaker.”

And if you get a question you can’t answer? Saying “I don’t know” is a-ok and certainly better than risking the alternative. “Do feel free to admit ignorance, especially when on stage with fellow experts who can call you on it,” said Rick.

Tell a Story

In addition to staying on topic, use devices to keep your audience interested, such as giving helpful advice and telling stories. “Storytelling makes your presentation engaging, relatable and personal,” said Steve Cherches, presentation coach and co-founder of training firm BigBlueGumball. “And go easy on the data. Your audience will be glad you did.”

Public speaking trainer and Keany Communications founder LeeAundra Keany agreed, recommending “examples and stories that support and enrich the topics you’ll be discussing.”

McDonnell advised sharing stories of failure — yes, failure — in particular. “You probably learned a lot from trying something and watching it go south,” she says. “Share that. It’s something probably everyone in the audience is familiar with and helps teach them to see it with another set of eyes.”

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Practice Your Delivery

How you phrase and say your words may be as important as the words themselves. A good idea is to repeat questions in your answer or at least answer in complete sentences. “Not only will the gesture endear you to audience members who didn’t hear it the first time around, but it will also give you time to formulate your response,” suggested keynote and corporate trainer Dr. Marlene Caroselli, author of *Principled Persuasion*. Caroselli added “Don’t start every sentence with the word ‘I.’ It reveals a serious lack of originality... also makes you seem egocentric.”

The mere tone of your voice makes a difference as well, noted Raybould. “Before you speak, make a point in your head of dropping your voice to the lowest pitch that’s comfortable for you,” he said. “Low voices are associated with credibility and authority.” It’s true — no one in The Addams Family ever second-guessed Lurch.

Leave Your Sales Hat at Home

Remember that you’re selling your expertise, not your product. “The audience wants to hear what you have to say, not what you’re trying to sell,” said Cherches. “If you impress them with your insight and wit, your product or service will sell itself.”

Christine Clifford, public speaking coach and author of *YOU, Inc.: The Art of Selling Yourself*, concurred. “Avoid making references to your book or company. Instead, share the knowledge you have learned. Afterwards you can sell your products or services.”

Make Eye Contact

When answering a question, where do you look? Consultants mostly agree: Respond to whoever asked you the question. Audience questions go back to the audience; moderator questions go back to the moderator. But there are exceptions.

“If a moderator is acting as a proxy for the audience and asking questions submitted by them, always answer the question while facing the audience... they are the ones who really asked the question,” said Carma Spence, author of the upcoming *Public Speaking Super Powers*.

You can also use your eyes to jockey for position, explained leadership strategist and author Mindy Gibbins-Klein. “When a question is aimed at the entire panel, catch the eye of the host before jumping in with an answer,” she said. “Move your body in a subtle way to signal that you have something to add.” (Note: yelling “I got this one!” is not subtle enough.) And finally...

Dress Smart

How you look will be a big part of how you come across, and many audiences can’t help but compare your appearance to other model, err, panelists. “The way you dress is critical. You need to be smart enough to look credible, like an expert, but not so formal as to distance yourself from the audience and your fellow panel members,” said Raybould. “We recommend dressing one level up from where you think you need to be, because it’s always easier to become informal than to try and become more formal.” In other words, guys, those ties can come off.

Raybould also recommended sitting up straight and not leaning back. "Body language isn't a precise science and it's often overrated, but the one thing an audience won't tolerate is someone who looks smug or over confident," he said. "Stay forward; stay focused."

And keep in mind you're in the spotlight. "Always assume someone in the audience is still watching you and could be snapping a picture with a cell phone," said Spence.

As they say, it ain't over 'til (the moderator says) it's over.

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