

You just found out you're going to moderate a conference program or webcast. Congratulations. Now what? What exactly are you going to do? If what you do is emulate what you've seen most moderators do at library conferences, both physical and virtual, chances are you'll politely ask attendees to take their seats before you start reading off the presenters' names and their canned biographical statements. Then you'll sit down and disappear for the rest of the program.

If that doesn't sound very exciting or productive, it's the unfortunate outcome of programs planned with little thought to what a moderator can and should bring to a library program of any type.

Instead, let me describe a role that moderators can play that will add value to any program. Taking the role of moderator seriously means being proactive about working with the speakers to design a well-thought-out program with a singular goal: delivering an outstanding program experience to the audience.

### Getting things off to a good start

Instead of thinking of the moderator as a librarian randomly assigned to a panel or program, consider it an important design decision to integrate the moderator into the program as an equal, if not more important, participant.

Several years ago I organized a debate between two teams arguing for and against "good enough" research. It was a huge success primarily because we chose a moderator who was the focal point of the program, commenting wisely after each team made its points, becoming one of the audience in order to compel attendees to line up to make their voices heard, and ultimately whipping up the crowd into a frenzy before they voted on the debate winner.

# MASTERING MODERATION



Running a successful program is more than just naming the names; it means being an integral part of the proceedings. A veteran moderator presents advice on how to make sure your session is a great experience for everyone involved.

by Steven J. Bell

Every moderator can decide whether he or she will simply be an awkward appendage to the main event or become an integral part of the proceedings. I argue that the latter option is attendee-centered program design.

## Setting the stage

When asked to serve as a moderator in any capacity, and before making a commitment, the first task is to ask questions and determine what the program organizer expects. If the only expectation is to read names and biographies off a sheet, you need to decide if that's all you wish to do. Be courageous and suggest that the moderator should take a more active role in the program. Assuming that the planners and participants agree, you should immediately agree to take responsibility for managing the program. Here are some of the primary responsibilities the moderator should agree to accept:

- Develop a timeline for preparation leading up to the program
- Create a script or timeline that gives structure to the presentation
  - Bring presenters together for program planning
  - Identify strategies to engage the audience
  - Keep the speakers on time and the attendees involved
  - Orchestrate the program with flexibility
  - Wrap up the proceedings with authority

## Designing the program

When attendees experience a great program, it's usually the result of intentional design. Most panelists will embrace a moderator who takes the reins and leads the presentation planning effort. A savvy moderator has a knack for planning the program, but avoids one so tightly scheduled that it offers no room for spontaneity or deviation from the plan. The moderator should set the tone early by establishing a timetable for preparing for the big day, and then taking responsibility for organizing the meetings, preparing agendas, and then leading the meetings. The panelists or presenters are the content experts; they bring the material and generate the discussion. It's the moderator who makes sure all presenters get their moment to shine, but more important creates the setting for those attending to play a major role in any program.

As the conference approaches, the moderator should plan a series of virtual meetings at which the participants will design the program. Think of it as a script that identifies the order of speakers, time allotted for each presentation, how the moderator will participate, and audience involvement. The more activity there is, the more detail should be included in the script. I moderated a program that combined multiple video segments, speaker com-

mentary, and a question-and-answer segment with the audience. With that much activity and quick shifts between each, a script covering what happens when, and who does what for how long, greatly increases the odds of success—and we had over 25 attendees come to the microphones to comment or ask questions in just one hour. The key to success is advance preparation; but the moderator must be the production expert who brings it all together.

## Looking for Phil Donahue

Pretty much anyone can read canned speaker introductions, but it takes a librarian with presence to moderate. Skilled moderators know how to create a dynamic between the presenters and the audience. The moderator and presenters, in their planning stages, should determine what level of audience participation they desire. That should be the starting point for all that follows.

The moderator should be physically located in the audience area, equipped with wireless microphone, to prompt questions and comments. Good moderators, much like talk-show hosts, know how to get the audience involved and keep the proceedings on topic, as well as how to deal with disruptions and potential problems, such as an attendee who monopolizes time during a discussion segment.

Poor timing is the downfall of most conference programs. To avoid getting derailed, the moderator needs to ensure that all panelists get their fair share of presentation time. A well-designed timetable should eliminate overcrowding the program with activity. I recall being asked to moderate a program where another member of the program planning committee structured the event. I was told to take 20 minutes to summarize and respond to the other speakers. Not only were there too many speakers on the program, but one went 10 minutes beyond his allotted time. I ended up giving a rushed four-minute response. Lesson learned.

With proper preparation each presenter should know exactly how much time he or she has. In advance, the moderator should set a clear expectation for all to adhere to that agreement, and indicate how each presenter will be signaled when the time is nearly gone. Moderators who sit idly while a single presenter hogs other speakers' time do a disservice to the entire panel and the audience. To further ensure a well-run program the moderator should arrive early to make sure everything is ready to go, that the technology is in place and tested, and that each speaker is ready.

## Bringing it all home

Nothing's worse than a conference session that ends on a flat or dull note, so think in advance about ways to bring the session to a finish that strives for a bit more than that

tired, old “Anyone have a question” standby. What if no one does have a question? Is that it? There are other possibilities. If nothing else, the moderator should prepare questions in advance to ask the speakers. Often just one is enough to stimulate the audience to follow with their own questions.

Take your wireless microphone and wade into the audience. Ask attendees what they might do with these new ideas when they get back to their libraries. If you have a friend or two planning to attend, ask them if they’d be willing to be your first audience participant. It’s all part of the preparation.

## Don’t let your session fail

While preparing this article I read a blog post by veteran speaker Scott Berkun titled “Why Panel Sessions Suck (and How to Fix Them).” Here are some final tips based on Berkun’s points that offer all would-be moderators advice on how to make sure their session is the great experience everyone involved wants it to be.

- Be an active moderator. Have good questions at the ready in case the audience is slow to speak up. Keep the presenters on time. Challenge the panelists to follow-

ators or other panelists. Work with the speakers to create a conversation with the audience. Encourage the speakers to tell their stories rather than offer facts.

- Be a leader. Bring energy and passion to the program; it’s infectious. Start it off with enthusiastic remarks that set the tone. Know when to shut up; give others the lead when appropriate. Be the person on the team who brings out the best in your teammates. It helps to have the natural ability to think fast on your feet and ad lib for effect, but consider having a humorous or engaging short anecdote at hand to share if needed. And you’re not a late-night TV show host, so no canned monologues or jokes.

The web offers yet more advice on how to be a great moderator, much of it found in the presentation blogs. Explore this territory for what it’s worth if you seek ideas beyond what’s offered here (search “great moderator” or “master moderator”). But expect some surprising or conflicting ideas.

In the end each moderator should decide what works best for each individual program, the speakers, and the audience. But there is little in the way of advice to offer in

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up on a statement or comment. If something isn’t going right—with the presenters, technology, or whatever—take personal responsibility for doing something about it. Don’t just sit there.

- Planning makes the difference. Use your gut instincts to change what seems to be going wrong as you and the speakers plan the program. Instead of those stale, canned introductions, find something unique and pithy to say about each one. Decide on a Twitter hashtag and promote it before and during the session.

- Controversy is not a dirty word. It’s all right for the speakers to debate a topic and have opposing viewpoints. Consider asking the speakers to pick one side of an issue or debate and defend their decision. Keep it under control with respect to time and negativity; keep it respectful

- Offer the presenters advance feedback on their visuals. Avoid a program that’s a series of mind-numbing slides. Urge the speakers to use video or more of a debate-style presentation. Mentor less experienced speakers who show the need for support. Make sure introverted panelists are equally involved; be equally aware of panelists with huge egos who may bully moder-

acquiring those intangible skills—timing, confidence, poise, emotion, passion, dynamism, and tact—that great moderators possess. They are learned through time and experience. Try watching videos of great moderators and presenters, then take every opportunity to practice. Remember, it’s not about perfection; it’s about presence.

A moderator can make or break the program. The complacent ones play no part in planning or running of the program, and that leaves wide open the possibility of a session that is completely dysfunctional and disastrous. Ultimately the best moderators, like the best presenters, are passionate in how they care about the attendees. There is much more to the role of the moderator beyond just naming the presenters’ names, but it all starts with focusing on the audience and doing whatever it takes to make sure they have a great program experience. ■



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