



Ten pitfalls to avoid when moderating debates

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Speakers: Florence Ranson (Communications Director, FoodDrinkEurope, Belgium), Marie Le Conte (moderator and freelance journalist, France)

Moderator: Frances Robinson (moderator and freelance journalist, United Kingdom)

You have just been asked to moderate a debate and, after the initial thrill of being invited has passed, you may start wondering whether you have the skills it takes to do the job properly. What does a moderator actually do that makes a session stimulating? The moderator's job is to ensure that the audience's needs are met, set the tone and pace, monitor the content and ensure that contributions are relevant by remaining vigilant at all times; in other words, it is an exercise in 'planned spontaneity'. This EuroPCom mini training session was held in order to help participants make sure that the next debate they moderate is lively, engaging and worthwhile with expert dos and don'ts.

Frances Robinson opened the session with a couple of "raise-your-hand-if" questions to the audience to break the ice, and explained the idea behind the workshop. The speakers also agreed to slightly change the title of the session to give it a more positive tone: "Ten top tips to help you succeed when moderating a debate".

Florence Ranson introduced the first tip. It is of the utmost importance to choose the right person to moderate a debate; someone confident to run the show. Also, experts should not be moderators as they already have an opinion on the subject matter and, thus, usually cannot be neutral. **Ms Robinson** presented the second tip, which emphasised the need to always pre-define the panel objectives as well as the overall aim of the debate.

Marie Le Conte went through the third tip, underlining that failure to prepare is preparing to fail. It was recommended that the moderator prepare notes beforehand in order to stay organised and be able to maintain the natural flow of the discussion.

Ms Robinson then guided the audience on the next tip, highlighting that a presentation is not everything. It was emphasised that speakers should avoid power-point presentations since the audience tends to focus on reading the slides instead of listening to the speakers. The acceptable exceptions being visuals and technical graphs used to accentuate or explain complex issues.

Ms Ranson then highlighted the importance of time management, and urged moderators to discuss time-keeping with the organisers in advance, agree on the debate's time structure, and inform the speakers in advance to that effect. For instance, they would be given five minutes introductory time to use a power-point presentation with the rest of the time dedicated to conversation. Moreover, the moderator then needs to be in charge and make sure all speakers stay within the given time limit. At the same time, moderators must be careful not to be rude or brusque towards speakers, but instead to use humour or little signs (e.g. ringing a bell) to warn everyone about timings. **Ms Le Conte** added that it might be effective to be proactive and identify potential "troublemakers" in advance and brief them beforehand about their allocated time.

Ms Robinson opened the floor to questions from the audience. Answering a question with regard to tips for debates streamed live or uploaded online, **Ms Robinson** shared a few creative ideas which



had proved useful for her in the past. It can be beneficial to have a Twitter wall to engage people in the room; Slido and other applications for polls can be used to take the temperature in the room (it's handy to conduct the same poll at the beginning and at the end of the debate to check attitude changes) and questions asked via social media can be read to the speakers for them to respond to.

Responding to further audience questions, **Ms Robinson** presented the next tip, underlining the importance of the moderator being spontaneous in keeping the ball rolling. Debates were compared to dinner parties where the hostess (a.k.a. moderator) should have done some preparation in advance (e.g. notes), but should not be afraid to react if necessary by helping to clarify some points, or by rephrasing some messages, or politely interrupting speakers in order to ensure that everyone gets balanced air time.

Moving to the next tip, **Ms Robinson** pointed out that it usually proves valuable for the moderator to have some questions prepared in advance to get the conversation going in case the audience seems reluctant at first. Usually a "raise-your-hand" question can help the audience get comfortable, but at the same time they need to be reminded that remarks and opinions need to be very brief as the aim is for questions to be asked. On that note, **Ms Le Conte** advised that when irrelevant questions are asked, the moderator can take more questions at the same time for the speakers to answer collectively.

Putting this tip into practice, the audience was invited to ask a number of questions to be grouped together and then answered by the panel. Most of the questions were aimed at getting advice on how to manage situations when, for instance, speakers and members of the audience make insulting, politically incorrect or culturally insensitive comments and how to address them. All of the panellists agreed that the reaction to these should vary based on the audience and the comment, but the general idea is for the moderator not to look annoyed and to move the discussion on as soon as possible, stating that it is not the right time to open that debate.

Ms Le Conte proceeded to the next tip on the value of humour. It is wise to have a few jokes at the ready but not push it if they fall flat. Diversity and cultural sensitivities must be born in mind because not everybody understands "word-play" the same way. **Ms Robinson** took this opportunity to highlight the significance of the next tip – keeping a neutral face while moderating a debate, with any personal opinions and sentiments put aside.

Finally, **Ms Robinson** concluded that the last tip is to keep practising in order to improve your moderating skills. It is a good idea to ask for feedback from friends in the audience and from the organisers or check what people have written on social media. **Ms Le Conte** added that it can be useful to watch yourself if the event is filmed and take note of what needs to be improved.

Finally, **Ms Robinson** wrapped up the session by briefly restating all ten tips mentioned during the workshop – choosing the right person as a moderator, pre-defining the panel objectives, failure to prepare is preparing to fail, presentation is everything, the importance of time, the moderator needs to be spontaneous, have some questions prepared in advance, the value of humour, poker face and keep practising. All three panellists thanked the audience for their active participation in the discussion noting that they had also learned a lot from the interesting remarks of the workshop participants.