

Ten Top Tips to Succeed When Moderating Debates

This one-pager is based on the panel held at EuroPCom in Brussels in November 2017, with moderator Frances Robinson, Florence Ranson, Director of Communications for FoodDrinkEurope and journalist Marie le Conte. The panel was originally called "Ten pitfalls to avoid when moderating debates" but ended up being a ten-point guide to how to have a lively and interesting debate, thanks to lots of great questions from participants. Below are the ten points.

1. Choose your moderator wisely

Get someone in-house or hire a professional? Make sure you pick someone who enjoys moderating, he/she will be all the better at something he/she likes. It helps if they know the subject matter, but don't pick someone who should actually be on the panel -- experts can hijack it. You want a neutral party. If you go with a professional, give them time to prepare/read up.

2. Define objectives

What do you want out of the event? Who is the audience? The moderator should help organisers understand what they want to get out of the debate so they can better lead the discussion. Is the aim a big social media impact, or an in-depth discussion of details? Also consider why are you doing this as a panel? Could a fireside chat / onstage interview / keynote speech make more sense?

For whole day events, you need to vary the pace between panels and speeches. Do not put too many people on a panel -- about four speakers is right for an hour.

3. Failure to prepare is preparing to fail

Always prepare notes for the opening statement. If the topic is one you know inside out, it might be tempting to assume you can just open the panel with some spontaneous thoughts. Don't risk it! Do your homework, prepare plenty of questions. Talk to speakers beforehand, if possible introduce them to one another, at least on the phone. Decide what your rules/timing are and **stick to them**.

4. Presentation is **not** everything

Powerpoint/Prezi are fine for keynote speeches but seriously disrupt the flow of a panel. This said, there are exceptions. They can make sense if there's lots of pictures (ie a tourism event) or very technical diagrams to show. But 90% of people don't know how to use it, and the second you have words on a screen, people will read them, not listen to the speakers, so avoid if possible!

5. Time is of the essence

It's your job to keep track of time! Useful tools can include cards / bells/ countdown timers, but above all, make panelists aware that if they talk too long they're taking the other ones' time. If the organisers want to have a separate timekeeper, make sure they're focused! If panellists do overrun or go off topic, it's better to go for humour than anger to get them back on track. Make sure everyone gets fair airtime.

6. Keep the chat train rolling

The "society hostess" bit of the job. Strike the "right" balance between authority and laissez-aller.

Keep the flow of discussion going: help clarify some points if necessary, ask for examples, get speakers to spell out acronyms/jargon. Help them out by rephrasing or repeating if there's a language issue. Don't type out everything you're planning to say verbatim. It's an exercise in planned spontaneity!

7. Questions, questions

Make sure people ask questions, not make statements. Check with the organisers before if there's anyone you should take questions from first. Do pay attention to who you're taking questions from. In the vast majority of Q&As, older men tend to be the most likely audience members to put their hand up first. This is fine, but make an effort to involve everyone else!

8. Un brin d'humour

Do: prepare a few jokes if the topic of the discussion isn't too heavy. You might well come up with some during the panel but it's always good to have one or two back up quips. But don't push it -- if the audience doesn't laugh at the first joke, don't panic and double down. In Brussels, avoid wordplay, not everyone in the room is a native speaker. And be aware of cultural sensitivities -- if in doubt, leave it out.

9. Neutral isn't boring

Do: practice your poker face. You're the chair and cannot be seen to agree or disagree strongly with one side, especially during heated discussions. Mastering the art of the blank facial expression is harder than it seems. Be professional, especially if panelists get heated.

10. Continual improvement

Do: watch the panels you chaired if they were filmed. Watching yourself speak might be a bit excruciating, but it's the best way to get better at it. Some things you did which at the time sounded awful were probably fine, but others you didn't even notice might well have been obvious to the audience. Ask the organisers for feedback. What did they like/not enjoy?