More Schmooze, Less Snooze:

How to Deliver "The Most Talked About" Conference Session

by DAVID SPARK

SPARK MEDIA
SOLUTIONS

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By David Spark, Founder of Spark Media Solutions, LLC
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I don't walk out of movies. I've never walked out of a boring lecture. I sit patiently in my seat through some of the worst theater. But I walk out of conference sessions all the time. And I know I'm not alone. We've all had that conversation in the halls. The question, "What did you think of that last session?" is often met with shrugs and disappointment.

I don't think conference sessions have to be as bad as they traditionally are. By following some basic guidelines, every session can be interesting and valuable for everyone involved.

Given my experience attending hundreds of conference sessions, speaking on a few, reporting on technology, appearing on and producing television, writing and producing corporate events, and working as an entertainer, I offer the following advice for moderators, panelists, and even attendees. Even if you're aware of some of this advice, look at every point in this document as a checklist to remind yourself what you should and shouldn't do at a conference session.

Step one for moderators is to…

…Do your homework
If you didn't have the opportunity to book the panel yourself, you'll need to read up on the panel ahead of time to know which members of the panel are likely to have input on which items. Feel free to ask them questions beforehand on issues that are of interest to them. When the moderator is prepared, they can set the stage and control the discussion because ultimately…

…Moderators are responsible
You're running the show and it's your fault if people start walking out. You're asking the questions. You're orchestrating the dialogue. Although it sounds pat, it's important to understand the issues and the panelists. You want your audience to respect you. So whatever you do…

…Don't let the panel talk about themselves
This is the laziest way to start a conference session and unfortunately most start this way. When a moderator agrees to give every panelist 3-5 minutes to talk about themselves and their business they immediately eat up 15-20 minutes of what is traditionally a 45 or 60 minute session. Get the presentation going as quickly as possible. Simply give brief introductions that establish credibility for everyone on the panel and then…

…Your first question should be the title of the session
I'm truly shocked how most moderators don't realize this very basic principle. The title of the session is what sold all the attendees to come there. That's all everyone in the room knows, and it's the issue for which they want answers. Come out of the gate with some introductory answers and then debate. Be like Jerry Springer and…

…Mix it up
You remember that kid in school that would always take you aside in 'confidence' and say, "Do you know what so and so said about you?" Be that kid. Let the others know what's being said about them behind their back. Create debate and controversy.

Agreement and pats on the back make for a boring session. If you're lucky enough to book the panel, purposely place competitors on the stage together and feed that tension. If someone throws a chair, even if it's just metaphorical, it's memorable. Even though I suggest you "be like Jerry Springer" don't let it completely get out of hand. You are the moderator, so…

…Control the loudmouth
There's one at every party and there's always one on every panel. We've seen it before. One person dominates the discussion and it becomes a tad uncomfortable for the rest of the participants and the audience. It's often a part of their nature and they honestly don't realize they're being inappropriate. You need to give time to all panel members. Luckily, loudmouths have to breathe too. When they do inhale, cut in and shift the focus to another panelist, but…

…No softball questions
You're not there to compliment people incessantly. All extremely successful people and businesses have an Achilles' heel. Find it and step on it. You don't have to be mean, but push them to face the unspoken facts about their business. Press them on the issue and…

…Force panelists to respond
There's nothing more irritating than a coy panelist. Most panelists are unnecessarily overprotective of their company's information and as a result say nothing about what they're doing that hasn't already been announced in a press release.

Do not let them get away with not answering your questions, and don't let them laugh it off in an effort to diffuse the line of questioning. Dig for a personal anecdote. They don't have to specify a client name, but force them to reveal something about a negotiation, an interaction, or an experience that went good or bad. Make them tell a story and…

Moderators...

...Never accept market generalizations

Often a panelist will make a claim about user behavior or market status and the audience just accepts it. Your job is to question it. Panelists need to give examples, metrics, and sources. Don't let them gloss over the issue and use the "I'll get back to you on that" excuse because they won't. If an audience or panel member doesn't probe deeper...

...Don't be embarrassed to interrupt

It can be very irritating when a panelist goes off in a direction that's unimportant or achieving his or her own agenda. You start to lose control of the discussion and everyone recognizes it. In these situations you need to play the heavy and cut them off. The audience will respect you for it, and actually the panelists will too if you handle it well.

You may be shy to do this, but if you give everyone a heads up before the discussion that you might cut them off it'll soften the blow when it actually happens. Plus, they'll think twice before they go into a long diatribe. A good time to interrupt someone is when you need to...

...Ask the question that's on everybody's mind

Panelists will often mention something that's startling, confusing, or controversial and then they'll just continue on as if it's common knowledge or they don't want to explain anymore. Don't let this happen. It leaves a huge gap in the discussion. If the question popped in your head, it's probably popped in the head of everyone in the room. But don't always rely on your own judgment. As a moderator, you might not fit into the audience demographic. What you know, and what the audience knows can be drastically different. For that reason...

...Gauge the room

During almost every conference session there's a point where the moderator or someone else asks a question of the room. "How many people _____ _____ ?" I find these questions to be rather amusing because they can be either a reflection of user behavior or a reflection of the skewed demographic of the attendees. For example, one session asked the attendees how many people watch an online video every day today vs. how many people watch a video online every day a year ago. Drastic difference (far more today), but what was more eye opening was the question of how many people are watching news vs. entertainment (entertainment won by a landslide). That insight really set the stage for questions and gave the panelists something to discuss, debate, and explain. While gauging the room adds fuel for the discussion, it's also a good time to...

...Open the floor immediately to questions

There's no need to wait until the end of your session to let the audience know that the floor is open to questions. This move immediately breaks the invisible fourth wall between the panel and the audience. It creates a more dynamic environment that keeps the audience awake and engaged. In addition, it prevents the panel from talking over the audience's head. If your panelists start confusing the audience, inevitably someone in the audience will ask for further explanation.

Allowing the audience to ask questions at any time saves you the trouble of having to determine if the audience is confused or not. If you wait until the end to open the floor to questions, you may have already lost your audience. Since you're letting the audience ask questions...

...Make sure you have a microphone for the audience

Days before the session, when you're talking to the conference producers about what materials you'll need as a moderator, ask to have a roaming wireless stick microphone and someone in the hall to run it to people who have questions. If you don't have a roaming microphone for the audience to ask questions, you'll have to...

Moderators…

…Repeat the question

When you're on stage, you can hear every small sound coming from the audience. The reason is the crowd is facing you. Conversely, if you're in the audience, you can't hear anything except the speaker. That's because most everyone has their back to you, or you have your back to them. As a result, there's an odd dynamic in that the presenter can have conversations that most others in the audience can't understand because they only hear half of the conversation.

So if the audience doesn't have a microphone, do your part as moderator and repeat the question in your microphone.

When you get the cue from the conference producers that it's time to wrap it up…

…Don't close with the prediction question

If you've ever closed with the question, "Five years from now, where do you see the market?" slap yourself in the face. It is the laziest, most uninspired question a moderator can ask and it has never yielded anything valuable, correct, or inspiring. First of all, no one definitively knows the answer to this question, and if they did they wouldn't tell a room full of conference goers. Instead…

…Summarize the top three findings of the session

It's a kind thing to do for the attendees and the panelists. It shows that you're a professional host and the producers will recognize this small gesture and look to you to moderate future panels. Keep a notepad to write down what you think those top findings are. Mention them when you're about to wrap up and then ask the panelists if they have any actionable suggestions or further recommendations for more information.

Panelists, one of those suggestions could be…

…Ask the audience a question that you and your business can solve

Why are the people in the room listening to you? They want you and/or your business to answer a problem they have. Help them out by asking the question for them. Don't wait until the end of the session to bring it up. Mention it at the beginning and repeat it again at the end during the summary. Even if they remember your top level issues…

…The audience needs to be told why they need to talk to you after the session

Some people are shy or just don't know what their first question should be if they come up to you and say hello. Help them out by giving them that reason and opening line so even shy people will have no problem coming up to you.

For example, my business, Spark Media Solutions, is tailored to creating custom editorial content. So I ask the question, "Do you work with really intelligent people who have great ideas that aren't being heard in your industry? If so, come talk to me." Asking a question like this has a dual effect, it sells yourself, but it addresses the reason the people are in the room. They're there to find answers. So it's your job to continuously address…

Panelists…

…Address their concerns by labeling them
The only reason you should use PowerPoint is to label new topics of your discussion. Too much information and images on a screen detracts from you the speaker. Think about the way Steve Jobs does a presentation. He never has screens filled with text or even complete sentences. Each screen simply displays a new topic or information he wants to announce. Use these title screens as anchor points to introduce new topics. DO NOT read the screen for the audience. They're not second graders. In fact, the audience is usually very educated…

…We've all read the newspaper
A newspaper costs 50 cents. The cost of the conference session is a bit higher. Don't rely on massively public examples that have been published in the New York Times or Wall Street Journal. While it's ok to reference a major story to show a trend, don't rely on them as your only examples. Instead…

…Give examples from your own experience
Everyone on the panel has a job. The reason everyone is in the room is because they want to hear personal experiences. Reveal some stories from what happened while you were working at your job, not what's in the newspaper. All this advice points to one umbrella understanding that you need to adhere to and that is to…

…Respect the audience
Recognize that the people in the room have chosen to take the time to come to your session. This is something you have to keep at the front of your mind when you're preparing an outline or speaking with the audience. It's a really powerful realization when you say to yourself, "Everyone in this room chose to come to my session to hear me speak." Everyone's time is very valuable. And you were their decision for that hour and they don't have to stay there.

Attendees…

…You can vote with your feet, but you don't have to
If you're an audience member, you are allowed to take control of the session. You don't just have to show your dissatisfaction by walking out. In rare instances, attendees can interrupt, but most don't because they're too embarrassed or think it's insulting. Don't feel that way. You paid a lot of money to be there and you should get the value you paid for. If the session is really inappropriate or severely off topic, chances are your fellow attendees will feel the same way. But this is really a judgment call. Don't do it liberally.

For example, I was at one session about podcasting that was entitled "Do's and Don'ts of Podcasting from Top Podcasters." It was a one hour session and the moderator let the panel of seven (uggh)

all talk about themselves. They ate up 20 minutes of a one hour session. I could have walked out, but I wanted to learn from these podcasters. So I just raised my hand in a very silent crowd (it was obvious everyone was bored) and said, "This panel is entitled, 'Do's and Don'ts of Podcasting from Top Podcasters.' We've just wasted 20 minutes and I haven't heard a single do or don't. You all have knowledge we don't have, so could each one of you please offer a single do and a single don't from your experience as a podcaster?" The room was ecstatic, and as a result the conversation shifted and became valuable for everyone.

A successful session results in a rush to the stage to talk to the speakers. To get more time with them and to not be locked in that trap…

Attendees...

...Approach speakers before the session

Research the speakers on the topics that you're likely to be interested in and approach them before they present instead of lining with the rest of the herd after the panel. After the panel conversations are rarely worthwhile. At most you'll be able to exchange cards and that's not a memorable moment. If you truly want a valuable experience at a conference...

...Don't attend the keynote

I have attended keynotes with some of the country's most wealthy millionaires and billionaires. And those were the most uninspiring and unrevealing speeches. You know why millionaires and billionaires become and stay millionaires and billionaires? Because they don't reveal valuable information to hundreds or thousands of conference attendees.

The only exception I can think of is watching a MacWorld keynote with Steve Jobs who always delivers something valuable (usually a product launch) during his keynote. For everyone else, stay out in the hall and...

...Have a conversation

The one hour you missed in the keynote room will be happily remedied by engaging in a conversation with all the other smart attendees who decided to wait in the hall. You'll be surprised what stories and connections you can make with anyone who is attending a conference the two of you are both interested in. And if you still don't think I'm right, when the keynote breaks ask someone walking out what they thought. Chances are they'll just shrug and sigh in disappointment. And if by remote chance it happens to be fantastic, don't worry, someone will write it up in a blog or trade publication. No one will write up that conversation you just had in the hall.

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David Spark
Spark Media Solutions
david@sparkmediasolutions.com
www.sparkmediasolutions.com