

How to Be an Effective Panelist

By Sharon Berman

Two years ago, I attended a professionals' signature event that featured a panel of sophisticated experts including lawyers. While the event was well-attended, and offered good networking, the panel presentation itself was a wasted business development opportunity for each member. You could not hear the panelists, not so much because of the less than desirable audio quality, but because each person seemed to be talking to himself. The PowerPoint slides were packed with practically illegible graphs.

I thought that this ineffective panel presentation was an aberration. Surely, the organization hosting the event would get it right the following year; however, this year, nothing had changed. To make it worse, the moderator — who had flown across the country to facilitate this event — could not be heard.

Participating on a panel, a conference or another organization's event is a terrific way to highlight your expertise. You can claim your share of the spotlight, but don't have the pressure of having to hold an audience's attention for an extended length of time. However, divvying up the burden makes panel participation look deceptively easy. Many a seasoned professional has fallen into the trap of thinking she can wing it. On the contrary, like any effective business development tactic, it takes preparation.

Shine in Your Showcase

The good news is that by thinking it through ahead, these wasted presentation opportunities can be transformed into those that can showcase your knowledge and stage presence. Here are some things to consider when you are invited to serve as a panelist:

In advance, make sure you understand who the audience is and what the participants want you to cover. Have a conversation with the moderator to know what kinds of questions will be asked, or request a list of the questions. Who will be making introductions — will they be self-



introductions or do you need to get information to whoever is spearheading the event. If you know people who plan to attend, talk with them beforehand about what they hope to hear. That also creates the opportunity for you to refer to them by name and personalize what you are saying.

If you are the moderator, have a conference call with the panelists so that each person knows his turf; you're minimizing any duplicating or thoughts or inadvertently stealing one another's thunder.

Think through the points you want to make and make bullet-pointed notes even if you don't intend to have them with you on the dais. It will help you clarify your thinking. Sound bites and the succinct examples and illustrations that make you memorable and create impact, don't usually fall off of our tongues. They usually need a brain gestation period — thus again the benefit of thinking this through in advance. Sidestep legal or industry jargon and put your creative juices to work thinking of how to express the same thing in other words. Your audience will find you and your thoughts refreshing.

Professionalism Means Practice

Practice what you would like to say. Whether you end up saying the same words or not, practicing your presentation will give you a more

confident platform and allow you to feel comfortable improvising. What often happens to unprepared professionals when all eyes are on them is that they freeze and can't be themselves. Just at the moment they should be dynamic and exude confidence they want to shrink and run away. Their manner of speech reflects this. You don't want to sound rehearsed, but you do want to be familiar with the points you plan to make.

If you have a lot of information you'd like to present, distill your points and then refer the audience to your website where you've posted more detailed information. Create PowerPoint slides that are uncluttered, with just a few bullet points in large, legible fonts. Make certain that all graphs are easy for the audience to see and understand.

Test It Yourself

Theoretically, it's the organizer's responsibility to make sure that the room is set up and that the equipment is working, but that person may be a volunteer who wants to get it right, but isn't sure what should be on the checklist. Rely on yourself. It's important to know that the equipment you're using is in working order. Make sure the microphones are turned on. This is particularly important if you are the first one to speak. Arrive early, during setup, so that you can test the microphones in advance, and ask if everyone can hear you.

From the audience's perspective, the panelists' table can look cluttered. Just before the panel is slated to start, if no one else is on top of it, ask

(continued on back)



Sharon Berman is principal of Berbay Corp., a marketing and public relations firm specializing in working with professional services firms. She can be reached at berman@berbay.com.

How to Be an Effective Panelist *(continued)*

that the remains of any meal be removed as well as miscellaneous items such as breadbaskets, extra glasses, etc., and check that the tablecloth is straight. Don't be afraid to quickly step down into the audience and take a look from their vantage point.

Most events have stationary microphones on the panelists' table. Don't presume that just because you are sitting at the table with microphones, everyone can hear you. If you are sharing a microphone, pull it over to you to speak directly into it. If it's in front of you, lean into it. If no one else is using the microphone properly and you are, you will be the one whom the audience remembers.

Confidence Is Key

When it's time for you to talk, dive right in. Avoid the temptation to thank the organization, the Academy, etc. Launch with one of your prepared sound bites that cuts through the clutter. Let your confidence in yourself as an expert translate into energy that reflects a solid belief in what you have to say.

Demonstrate that you are engaged in the presentation. Stage presence does not just come into play when you are speaking. People are watching you throughout your time on the dais. Sit up straight, lean forward and show that you are listening to the other panelists by turning your head, nodding — even if you disagree — or offering similar gestures to show that you are

right with them. Do not slouch in your chair, stare off into space or read your notes when other panelists are speaking.

When commenting on other panelists' thoughts, use their names. Smile and be expressive. Also, keep your comments relatively short. Two minutes seems a lot longer to someone listening in the audience than it does to you when you are talking. While you may not agree with what other panelists have to say, be respectful. Let others complete their thoughts, and avoid talking over another person.

If you are the moderator, you have more of a balancing act. You want to make sure you keep the audience engaged by speaking clearly into the microphone. You also want to look at the panelists when you pose questions. There may be even more of a fine line when you are also a panelist and fielding questions. In advance of the event, think of comments that can help you segue from a panelist's answer to asking the next question.

As a moderator, you need to ensure that someone doesn't speak too long. You can do this by making sure the panelists are aware of the time limits in advance and advise that you will interrupt them if they go on too long, which may be embarrassing. Ask them to please not put you in this position.

Have your own questions prepared so that you can come to the rescue if no one in the audience

has one to start the Q&A ball rolling. If there's dead silence from the audience, raise your hand. When fielding questions from the moderator or audience, repeat or rephrase them. Don't assume that people can hear the moderator or someone in the audience. Repeating the question also gives you a chance to gather your thoughts. If an audience member asks you a question, when you respond, direct your eyes and answer to him or her for at least several seconds.

Make the most of your moment in the sun by leaving enough time to stay afterwards to answer or ask any questions, and network with the other panelists and audience.

Leverage Your Participation

It's important to leverage your participation on a panel, whether you're serving as the moderator or a panelist. You can do this by placing an announcement or press release on your website, drafting a media pitch and focusing on garnering media interviews related to the panel, or getting the word out via social media.

Serving as an expert panelist greatly benefits you by contributing to your visibility and credibility in ways that ultimately accelerate your firm's revenue growth. With forethought and preparation, you can maximize your participation on a panel, making your efforts go a long way for both you and your firm.

This article was originally published in *The Recorder*

For more information on law firm and attorney marketing, contact Berbay Corp:

Phone: 310-405-7345 Website: www.berbay.com Blog: www.blog.berbay.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/group Twitter: [@BerbayCorp](https://twitter.com/BerbayCorp)

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/sharonberman Email: berman@berbay.com

Reprinted with permission from the "May 2012" edition of the "The Recorder"© 2012 ALM media Properties, LLC. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited. For information, contact 877-257-3382, reprints@alm.com or visit www.almreprints.com.