

How to Host a Lively Panel  
Discussion

# Panel Discussion Look Book



**DIA** GLOBAL  
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# Make Your Upcoming Panel Discussion a Success

Whether you're in-person or via a computer screen, the best panel discussions are spirited undertakings, with **high energy, focused content, and easy give-and-take between the participants.**



# 5 Quick Ways Session Chairs can Prep for an Excellent Virtual Discussion

1. Know your panelists in advance. Read their bios and arrange for a 1:1 phone call.
2. Introduce the panelists to one another in advance. Schedule a call or two with the entire panel (build a rapport/set expectations/talk content).
3. Know your audience.
4. Have more questions than you need.
5. Practice

# Tips, Quick Fixes, and What to Avoid when Moderating a Panel Discussion

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# Tip #1: Build Relationships between the Panelists

- ▶ **AVOID:** A group of strangers virtually sitting “on stage” together. This can quickly become awkward and distract from the overall purpose of the conversation. **A great panel should make the audience feel like they are a fly on the wall for an actual conversation between friends or sparring partners.**
- ▶ **QUICK FIX:** If the panelists haven’t connected before, have them spend some time getting to know each other. Even **a quick email exchange and/or call followed by ten minutes of virtual face-to-face time (Zoom, Google Duo etc.)** can help build a rapport and give time to compare notes on what to cover (and avoid).

# Tip #2: Communicate “Stage” Expectations to Your Panelists – Notes for Setting the Scene

- ▶ **Encourage the panelists to talk to each other.**
  - **Try to avoid:** panelists having individual conversations with the moderator. This leads to a series of one-on-one interviews instead of a dynamic discussion
  - **Quick fix:** invite each participant to ask a question of one other panelist. Along with catapulting them into a natural back-and-forth, it’s fascinating to see what they most want to learn from one another.
- ▶ **Ask panelists to keep their comments short.** The most compelling responses are usually no more than 60 seconds. That’s where you start pushing the limits of conversational attention span and interrupting the natural flow of back-and-forth.
  - **Try to avoid:** long consecutive monologues
  - Short answers open the door for spontaneous responses, where it sounds like the panel is brimming with ideas. The energy “on stage” and in the virtual meeting room will pick up, panelists than begin to build on one another, and there’s more room for unexpected wisdom and spontaneous humor.
- ▶ **Don’t let every panelist answer every question.** That immediately gives way to dull turn-taking.
- ▶ **Inform panelists that you might interrupt them.** The moderator’s job is to guide the conversation and to make it worthwhile for the audience. If panelists start rambling, you need to jump in with a comment, a fresh question, or a redirect.

# Tip #3: Come Prepared to Keep the Session Interesting

- ▶ **Start by asking for a QUICK story.** Panels fall flat when participants never get to share their knowledge—and the audience has no context for why they're there.
  - **Avoid:** Sometimes moderators try to solve that by reading lengthy bios for each panelist, which is an unproductive use of time.
  - **Quick Fix:** Just introduce the panelists with a few highlights that explain why they're "on stage", and then invite each panelist to tell a BRIEF story on the topic.
- ▶ **Pose questions that make the audience—and the panelists—think.** The richest questions often start with why (to get at motivation/purpose) and how (to get at strategy/tactics). It can also help to surface tension, which doesn't have to be with other panelists; you can prompt them to challenge conventional wisdom or their own past experiences.
  - **LIVE and Semi-LIVE sessions will have audience participation.** Throughout the panel discussion, moderators should be encouraging the audience to submit questions to the Q&A feature.
- ▶ **Run a lightning round.** Come ready with a few questions that panelists can answer in a word or a sentence. Other than an opening story, that's the only time you want everyone to chime in: it's a great way to get diverse ideas on the table swiftly and represent everyone's voice.
  - It can be early on if there's a burning question where you want to surface a range of views
  - a nice interjection to keep the conversation moving if it's dragging in the middle, or
  - a strong closing if you want to wrap up with a light, memorable Q&A.

# Open Q&A: Bringing the Audience into the Conversation

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# Question Time at DIA

- ▶ Our attendees truly look forward to their time, within the session, to interact directly with the speakers.
- ▶ Plan for 15-30 minutes of Q&A time with the audience at the end of the session OR plan to invite Q&A during your panel discussion ie. at 10- or 15-minute intervals



# Tips for Q&A Success:

- Your responsibility, as Session Chair, is to the entire audience. It's important to:
  - Ensure attendees are respectful to one another during the open discussion
  - Be sure to read the question you are addressing out loud
- ❖ Prepare several questions for the Q&A portion in case there are no immediate questions from the audience. This is also an opportunity to punctuate key points from the session.
- The goal, for your speakers, is not to simply answer questions, but to draw links between the questions and their content.



*Be prepared to draw the turtle (aka attendee) out of their shell!*

# Tips for Q&A Success: As the Session Chair/Moderator

- Announce the Q&A session timing at the beginning of the session: This accomplishes two things:
  1. Your audience is reassured that they will get to ask their questions
  2. Your audience is encouraged to start thinking of questions.
- As the Q&A session begins, **let your audience know how much time you have**: “We have about fifteen minutes for your questions.”
- **Don’t end the Q&A session abruptly**. Let the audience know: “We have time for two or three more questions.”
- When your speakers have finished answering questions, **repeat the main theme or key messages of your session, or repeat the call to action if applicable**. This technique will bring closure to the process and reinforce your messages.

# Questions?

If you have any questions, please contact  
our planning team at  
[AnnualMeetingProgram@DIAglobal.org](mailto:AnnualMeetingProgram@DIAglobal.org)

Thank you!

We are looking forward to your session!