

Conference Panel Sessions: Dead or Alive?

By David Cruickshank, Kerma Partners

The conference program item in your hand looks promising: "Panel Discussion of Current Issues in Evidence Disclosure". You attend the 90 minute session. One moderator and three panelists appear. The moderator introduces each in turn. Each delivers a 25-30 minute lecture, covering much material you already know about. The moderator apologizes. There are just five minutes left for questions and discussion. The burned out audience has one question and no enthusiasm left.

How many of us have been drawn to the "dead panel session" and been disappointed like this? The idea of a "panel" promises so much but delivers so little at most conferences. This can be changed through creative leadership of moderators.

The moderator, at the earliest stage of organization, must take control of the planning for a panel session. Make it clear that a panel must be:

- interactive within the panel and with the audience;
- a series of very short responses or comments to a planned agenda of issues;
- a forum for generating new ideas, different perspectives, or solutions to problems;
- a time to build on information that may be in the conference papers, not to repeat that information.

Above all, a panel discussion should not be a series of lectures. Granting a three to five minute "opening statement" to each panelist is the only exception to this rule.

Let's review some options for livelier panel sessions.

The moderator recruits panelists who are likely to have different views on a series of topics. For example, on Evidence Disclosures, you might recruit the prosecutor, a defence lawyer, a judge, and a representative from a crisis counseling centre. Next, prepare a list of topics and a few pointed questions under each topic. Meet with your panelists (or conference call) and allocate total time to each topic and a "lead response" person to each question. Build in around five minutes of audience question time for each topic.

With this prepared "questions script" your job as a moderator is to direct traffic. Keep responses short. Ask for differing views. Call for examples from the experience of the audience.

In these sessions, the audience and the panelists are all given the facts and data of a case study. The audience is seeing it for the first time, so the moderator may have to present the facts briefly. The panelists should all have something unique to contribute to the case. This method works best with cross-disciplinary panelists.

For example, a panel on Environmental Offences might consist of an investigator, an environmental engineer, a scientific expert, and a lawyer.

The moderator again plans the questions. (I often ask my expert panelists to produce a list of questions they would like to be asked.) The order of discussion will be analytical: issues, relevant facts, application of law, expert data, and likely solutions.

In this method, the moderator can ask the audience how they would apply law to facts or what weight they would give to facts in the case study. The use of overhead diagrams, maps and lists will add visual interest to the session.

For these panels you need to run a parallel live or videotaped demonstration. It works well when you want to dramatize the actions of the judge or lawyers or to demonstrate a skill. A good example might be: Mediation Skills in Settlement Conferences.

Plan a short demonstration that can be divided into at least four segments. The moderator starts and stops the demonstration. At each break, the moderator asks the panelists to comment. Plan to have a "lead respondent" for each segment. Again, turn to the audience for questions like: "What is most difficult about this skill for you?"

The moderator or one panelist should conclude by summarizing the key skills or actions that you expect in a good performance. In my experience, the demonstration-response panel is a most engaging format.

To liven up any panel session, moderators can put their questions on a clipboard, get a wireless microphone: and start wandering. From the audience you are better positioned to do a number of things: jump in when a panelist is going into overtime; notice which panelist is ready to respond; and call upon audience members for questions and comments. Just being in the audience promotes the interaction that you are looking which panelist is ready to respond; and call upon audience members for questions and comments. Just being in the audience promotes the interaction that you are looking for.

The next time you are asked to be a panelist or a moderator, make a difference by planning a lively panel. Your audience will learn more, retain more, and come to believe in the conference program promises.

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TEMPLATE
Planning a Panel

Time	Topic/Questions	Faculty Speaker	Added Comments By
	A. Q. 1 Q. 2		
	B. Q.1 Q.2		
	Audience Questions		
15	BREAK		
	Audience Questions		
	Audience Questions		

Panel Planning Sheet to be used with "Panels: Dead or Alive" by David Cruickshank of Kerma Partners.
You may use this template with acknowledgement. See www.kermapartners.com.