



HOW TO ROCK A PANEL

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At any conference, there are ten times more panelists than there are keynote speakers, so the odds are higher that you're on a panel than giving a keynote speech. Therefore, rocking a panel is an important skill for evangelists, too. A panel looks easy. There are four or five other people on it, and it lasts only sixty minutes. How hard could it be? Herein lies the problem: because everyone thinks a panel is short and easy, no one prepares for it. In reality, a panel is harder than an individual speech because you cannot control a panel like your own keynote speech, and you get much less air time.

This is what to do if you want to be the person everyone comes up to talk to after a panel:

Know the subject.

If you're invited to a panel about a subject that you don't know, decline the invitation. I don't care how wonderful the opportunity seems to be. If you can help it, never provide a way for people to learn that you're clueless.

Control your introduction.

The first mistake that most panelists make is assuming that the moderator has an up-to-date and accurate bio. The moderator either knows nothing about you or has done a cursory Google search and found a bio that is incorrect. Therefore, before the panel starts, hand the moderator a three-sentence bio and ask her to read it verbatim.

Speak up.

The optimal distance between your lips and the microphone is one inch. This is because you're sitting down, you're hunched over, and you're not projecting. So get close to the mike and speak up.

Entertain, don't just inform.

As in keynotes, your primary goal is to entertain, not inform. The funnier you are, the more people will think you're smart because it takes intelligence to be funny. I'd go so far as to pick a friendly fight with the moderator or another panelist. Have fun.

Tell the truth, especially when the truth is obvious.

If you're lucky the moderator will try to provoke you with tough questions. This is good thing because it provides an opportunity to be (a) funny and (b) a straight shooter. "The truth will get you glee." If everybody knows the truth, don't try to lie. It would be far better to say, "I take the Fifth Amendment." At least that will get a laugh.

Answer the question that's posed, but don't limit yourself to it.

When asked a question, answer it as quickly as possible, but then feel free to take the conversation in the direction you want it to go. For example, let's say that the moderator asks, "Do you think smart phones will get viruses soon?" It's okay to answer, "Yes, I think this is an issue, but the real issue is the lack of good cell phone coverage," if that's what you want to talk about.

Be plain, simple, and short.

Let's assume you are on a panel of experts. Let's further assume the moderator is an expert. The moderator asks a question. You direct your answer to her and to the other panelists—all experts, so you launch into an alphabet soup, acronym du jour response. Big mistake. The audience is the audience, not the moderator, nor the panelists. Reduce the most complex and technical issues to something plain, simple, and short, and you'll stand out.

Fake interest.

This may be one of the hardest aspects of a panel. Let's say the other panelists are in the middle of a long, boring, jargon-filled response. The temptation is to check email or resist looking bored. Don't do it. Fake rapt interest because the moment you look bored, a photographer is going to snap a picture or the cameraman is going to put your face on the fifty-foot screen.

Never look at the moderator.

The moderator is a proxy for the audience. When you answer, look at the audience because the audience doesn't want to see the side of your head. (FYI, a good moderator will not make eye contact with you—forcing you to look away from him and toward the audience.)

Never say, "I agree with the previous panelist."

A moderator will often ask everyone on a panel to answer the same question. If you're not the first to reply, there's a temptation to say, "I agree with what my colleague just said..." Instead, come up with something different, or, say, "I think that question has been answered. For the audience's sake, let's move on."