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TeamSpeak

Several learners in my "Bite the bullet: How not to kill your presentation with your slides" classes have asked about team or panel presentations. This article will present suggestions and tips for professional team presentations from my experience as well as wisdom from several colleagues (fellow STC and AMWA members and colleagues at Medtronic).

In the beginning: Pick a leader

First, have the team select a strong personality to lead and manage the process. If possible, choose someone with project management experience to delegate, schedule, direct, and shepherd the team, overseeing outlines and timelines that clarify expectations. The leader should help the group function smoothly and focus each individual part of the presentation to contribute to a seamless collective delivery.

Kathleen Roman of Medical Protective puts it this way: "Assign each speaker as a content expert for a specific aspect of the presentation. Like a potluck supper, this will ensure that all 'courses' are covered, and you don't end up with four bowls of informational potato salad . . . Challenge each speaker to identify the 'three most important points that you want to share with our audience about your slice of the topic.' Make them give that information to you in writing. Then ask for an outline of how they will present this information."

Once the leader has this information, he or she can "discuss overlaps and conflicts. Those aren't necessarily bad, but it's good to not have a lot of overlap and to be aware of conflicting views," says Linda Gallagher of TechCom Plus, LLC.

The timeline should direct the team to submit slides, handouts, and possibly a list of potential questions to the group to avoid last-minute panic. The leader will also communicate with company or conference contacts about the overall presentation (submitting abstracts, handouts, bios, and AV requests).

Next: Practice, practice, practice

The leader should also mandate as many group rehearsals as possible. In-person rehearsal is best, but virtual practice is better than none. As Marco Gutierrez of Medtronic suggests: "Practice as a team! Often teams split up slides but don't practice together. You often end up with less than the sum of the

parts as team members veer off message or steal each others' thunder or the big points are lost in favor of smaller points.”

In my experience, it is clear that the leader must act as dictator to enforce time limits in rehearsals as well as in the presentation. I was once scheduled last on a panel where everyone exceeded their time limit and I was left with about 30% of my allotted time.

On presentation day

On the big day, the leader and team should arrive an hour early to forestall or manage any technical difficulties. If the team has functioned virtually up to this point, everyone should introduce themselves and exchange business cards. Once the technology has been corralled, the leader can handle last minute details while the team relaxes and drinks coffee.

At the start of the presentation, the leader should “introduce the topic to be discussed and the questions to be answered; then, present the panelists by name, credentials, organization, and focus for the event . . .” This will help the team be “seen as a collective defining and addressing a problem together while also establishing audience expectations,” says Daniel Latch, trainer, coach, and facilitator at TargetingChangeWorks.com.

Another duty of the leader, according to Kim Berman, a fellow AMWA member, is to check ahead with the team to see “if they’d prefer getting questions as they arise or at the end of the talk. Let the audience know when questions will be allowed and reinforce the point if interruptions occur at the wrong time.”

I've found it most helpful to have an "ask-it basket" to pass around for written questions, which helps shy audience members ask questions when they otherwise might not raise a hand. I always seed the basket with questions generated by the panelists so that each team member gets to answer at least one question. Another method of generating questions is suggested by Cheryl Landes of Tabby Cat Communications, who says “I’ve found that it’s best to develop a set of questions and give the list to panel members in advance so that they can prepare their answers. I always give them more questions than we’ll have time to cover, because one never knows the length of responses. Nothing is worse than having ‘dead air’”!

Time management is a crucial leader role, as Berman points out: “Don’t feel guilty for cutting panelists off if they go too long, interrupt other panelists, or take over the session! Your job is to be ‘panel policeman’ for this group. The audience needs to get the information from all presenters, so you need to be the traffic cop in this situation.”

Finally, Kit Brown-Hoekstra of Comgenesis LLC suggests that “the leader should moderate the presentation so that presenters stay on track and the discussion ends on time.” Such moderation will increase the perception of professionalism for the whole team and each individual.

If no formal evaluation is required by the conference or the company, the group should generate its own evaluation form before the presentation. It can be as simple as asking participants to tell you what they

will do with this new information or how they will change their behavior as a result of hearing your talk, suggests Roman. This type of evaluation provides closure and invites listeners to participate right up to the end. Such feedback, says Roman, “may help fine-tune future presentations based on the expectations of previous attendees.”

Whether you are a presenter or the leader, remember that you are all still “on stage” even when you are not talking. As Stephanie Deming, Scientific Editor at MD Anderson Cancer Center, points out: “Too often I’ve seen panelists read, talk, yawn, etc., while a fellow panelist is speaking. During one panel discussion, while one of the panel members was speaking, another panelist tried to engage me in conversation. We were seated at a table in the front of a big auditorium, and it was embarrassing and distracting to have my fellow panelist trying to talk to me while I was trying to pay attention to the speaker. The speaker eventually got so distracted by the talking that she stopped speaking, turned toward us, and asked us to be quiet. I wished that I had a big sign saying, ‘It wasn’t me!’”

Conclusion

Team presentations can be a challenge, but good management can decrease your headaches and increase your impact and professionalism. As project managers say, “In the dictionary, **Plan** comes before **Work**.” I’d modify that to “**Plan** and **Preparation** come before **Presentation**.”

My thanks to the colleagues mentioned in this article for the insights and wisdom that they added to my ideas.