

Hints for the Successful Moderator

I have tried to think through what it is that I do that makes my phone ring when candidate meetings are scheduled, and why I was asked to work with you tonight. Here are things which I find useful.

Know the ground rules, the candidates' names and have a good idea in your mind (or on paper) as to how the time will break out for greetings, opening statements, questions, rebuttals, closing statements, wrap up.

Dress well. Although the candidates are the stars, you are in charge. Professional dress helps establish your credibility. The candidates and the host are counting on you to be in charge, and you need to exude confidence as you arrive.

Know how to get where you are going. I have been known to make a "dry run" to a location with which I am not familiar.

Arrive early. Even the best organized meetings can often use an extra hand. And if the press or television are present, know where they will be located. Particularly for TV, know where your cameras are, who the director is, whose sound system has control (the building or TV), and think about how you will handle an equipment failure.

Test every microphone. More times than not, you will find one which is either not working or is set at a volume level totally different from the others.

Take the time to introduce yourself to the League members (or others) who are hosting the forum. Find the bathroom (for the candidate who asks, of course).

Introduce yourself to each candidate. If you are at all uncertain about the pronunciation of a name, ask the candidates to say their own names, and write them down with whatever phonetic help you need. Work to put the candidates at ease. They will all be nervous, no matter how experienced they are.

Be prepared to write names on the back of candidate table signs, make larger timer signs or ask the timers to move so that you and all of the participants can see them easily. Be sure to point out to the candidates where the timers are, and emphasize that timing will be followed, and that you will interrupt if they go over.

Be concise in your introductions of candidates, review of ground rules, etc. Remember again, the candidates are the stars.

Concentrate on the audience if you are speaking to the audience. If you are speaking to a particular candidate, look at that candidate. If there is television coverage, you must decide if you are playing to the live audience, the camera or both. If both, your opening and closing remarks should include the camera as well as the live audience.

Repeat every question so both candidates and audience members are clear as to what has been asked. This means that you need to listen carefully to oral questions. You may want to write them down because if you have a five-candidate meeting, the fourth and fifth candidates (or sooner) may need to hear the question again. If you don't understand the question, neither will the candidates! Ask the questioner to clarify or rephrase the question.

Pay attention. You are the only one who will know which candidate answered the last question first, and who gets first crack at the next question. Devise a method of keeping track on a piece of paper. It is up to you to make certain that all candidates have the same number of opportunities to answer questions.

Work to maintain a poker face and react to questioners or candidates. However don't forget that you are human, and that the proper reaction to a humorous moment is to laugh.

Useful thoughts for maintaining control of a difficult meeting:

- Make sure the candidates and the audience know the ground rules.
- Keep access to a microphone.
- Stand up or step toward a candidate (looking him/her right in the eye) who is heading out of line. Try to stop it before it happens. Again, this means paying attention.
- Initially, ignore hecklers or those who interrupt.
- If disruptions continue, from either candidates or audience members, be direct and ridicule, if necessary: "Mr. X., This forum is being held for the benefit of everyone in this room, not just yours." "Ms. Y, we have all agreed to a set of ground rules, and I am sure you will have an opportunity to make your point – just not now."
- If things get totally out of hand, call a recess and ask a League member to call the local police.

Always remember, the hallmark of a successful meeting is that all participants have been treated with absolute fairness, no matter your own personal feelings about a candidate or an issue. This is what maintains the League's credibility and yours. And, yes, if you have done the job well, you will be exhausted when you get home. Good Luck!

Prepared by Marilyn D. Scholl, Scholl Communications Incorporated