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**BH2 – How to conduct an effective panel discussion**

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***What is a panel discussion?***

A panel discussion is a conversation on a specific subject between an interviewer (usually the program host) and two or more interviewees. The interviewer helps the panelists make their statements clearly, and then helps create a discussion so that listeners can gain further insights into the subject, or about the panelists.

A good panel discussion is more than the sum of its parts. It is more than a sequence of individual interviews. A panel provides the extra value that comes when two or more people are prompted or challenged to engage in a discussion that provides new and sometimes surprising insights into the subject, and/or the panelists themselves.

***How can panel discussions help me serve my listeners better?***

- Listeners love to listen in on a lively conversation among interesting people.

- Listeners get to hear from people who are making the news.

- Listeners learn that there can be many valid points of view on important topics.

- Listeners feel encouraged to question or confirm their own beliefs.

***How can conducting panel discussions help me produce better radio programs?***

- Setting up a panel encourages me to find people with important and diverse perspectives on a topic.

- Panel discussions can produce story ideas I can pursue in future programming.

- Lively panel discussions prompt listener feedback, and provide material I can use in future programs.

***How do I get started?*** (Learn more about these and other points in the *Details* section below.)

- Decide on the topic to be covered.

- Choose panelists with a range of things to say.

- Plan for gender fairness.

- Coach your guests.

- Start with a strong introduction.

- Get out of the way—but keep control!

- Respect your panelists.

- Plan for feedback from listeners.

- Consider doing an on-location panel.

***Details***

**Decide on the topic to be covered.** Choose a subject that is interesting, important, and perhaps controversial. It should have room for disagreement and debate. For example, a topic such as “Should farmers adopt sustainable farming practices?” might be unlikely to stimulate much interesting disagreement. But a topic such as “Should farmers only use organic practices?” might trigger a very useful discussion. Also, the topic should not be so vague or broad that discussion becomes unfocused and listeners lose interest. For example, a topic such as “effective new farming practices” is far too broad, and it might be difficult to stimulate a useful debate. A topic such as “effective weeding practices for growing tomatoes” is much more focused.

**Choose panelists with a range of things to say.** Choose panelists who are well-informed about the subject, and comfortable engaging in a group discussion. Panelists should be able to illustrate their ideas with examples or stories:*“Here’s what happened when I tried this new seed …”* Three panelists is a manageable number—you will get a range of viewpoints, but not too many to handle. Prepare yourself by writing out one or two questions you can ask each panelist to help them bring their specific knowledge or opinion to the discussion.

**Plan for gender fairness.** Producers often think men will be better panelists because they assume men are more familiar with debating and arguing. But both women and men have important points of view, and a mix of voices is very powerful. Sometimes, female panelists may be less willing to speak out. Anticipate this and make sure that the women’s voices are heard equally. When a topic is deeply important to women, you may want to produce an all-woman panel to ensure that women with a range of opinions are heard strongly and clearly. The supportive “chemistry” of an all-female panel can encourage women to go well beyond what they might be comfortable saying in a mixed-sex panel.

**Coach your guests.** Tell your guests that you want them to speak freely and often, as they would in a lively conversation. Remind them that their point of view is essential to the listeners’ understanding of the subject. Also, take the time to learn your panelists’ stories and remind them to tell those stories on-air. One guest telling a story prompts another guest to tell her story. Give guests permission to interrupt, but remind them that, as the moderator, you may have to step in to keep the discussion focused. Some panelists will have more confidence speaking. Your job as moderator is to make sure each of your panelists has the opportunity to make their points.

**Start with a strong introduction.** Set the scene for the panel by providing some interesting context. For example:

*“Now is the time when all farmers are thinking about how to water their tomatoes. And emotions run strong and deep about the different ways to do so. Today on our panel, we have two farmers with two different philosophies on irrigating tomatoes. Esther runs a vegetable farm that she inherited from her mother. She uses a traditional direct watering system because that’s what she was taught. Irene has started her own farm, using a new style of drip irrigation. Let’s start with Esther. Welcome to the program. Explain how you water your tomato plants. (etc… etc…)”*

**Get out of the way, but keep control!**  Often, the best moments in a panel discussion happen because of the “chemistry” among the panelists. After each panelist has made an introductory comment, or answered a question you have asked them, it is your job to “stir the pot” by asking one panelist to react to the comments of another panelist. With any luck (and a well-chosen topic and well-chosen panelists), the panel discussion will then “take off” in ways that deepen the listeners’ understanding. Remember though, that one or more of your panelists might want to change the topic to something they would prefer to talk about. Your first duty is to your listeners, not your panelists. For example: if you told your listeners that the panel would discuss fertilizer subsidies, it is your duty to keep your panelists focused on that subject. If you anticipate trouble on this, you can say at the beginning of the discussion that you will be exercising your responsibility to keep all panelists on subject.You may need *to step in and regain control by saying something like, “I would like to step in and stop you there, Jacob. As you know, our panel discussion today concerns the new fertilizer subsidies. May we please have your opinion on whether or not these subsidies will help our farmers?”*

**Respect your panelists.** Remember that you don’t have a panel discussion if you don’t have panelists! Some of your panelists will have very different opinions from most of your listeners. Treat all panelists with the same level of respect. The panel will only work if each panelist feels that they have an equal opportunity to contribute. And remember: a panel discussion is not the place for you, the host, to present and defend your opinion on the subject.

**Plan for feedback from listeners.** If you are broadcasting live, and have someone helping you in the studio, you can prepare your listeners before the panel begins by telling them that they can call or text with questions or comments they want your panelists to deal with.

**Consider doing an on-location panel.** You might choose to host a panel at the weekly market, or in some other public place. The station would handle this like a “special event,” and promote it in advance. It could be a great opportunity to raise the profile of the station, or the farm program, or the host. On the technical side, it means setting up amps and speakers so those at the event can hear the panel. The host and the panelists get lots of energy from performing in front of a live audience, and this will make your panel discussion more attractive to your listeners.

**Give it time.** Use the panel format when you want a spirited conversation with two, three or four participants. You need enough time for each panelist to make their opening statement, and then time to prompt them to dig deeper into the topic and into each other’s comments. If your panel is made up of people who talk for a living (for example, experts, government officials, or broadcasters), this might take 10 minutes. If the panel is made up of people who farm for a living, it might need 20 minutes or longer.

## Acknowledgements

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