Extreme Panels - Surprisingly Unique Formats
for Asking & Getting Answers from Panelists

This is *Extreme Emcee* Brian Walter. And you are about to embark on a fast, educational micro-program journey…about the *Extreme Emcee* approach to facilitating panels.

You're likely reading this because you are a meeting organizer, Emcee, professional speaker, trainer, facilitator, consultant, or corporate or association leader and a panel is in your future. And you know that is…risky.

I was going to start this program by confidently saying…the majority of panels are lame. I didn't…because I would be underselling the reality. Almost ALL panels are lame. You know this because you ALL have experienced them. Many of you have organized them. And most of you have suffered from being ON them.

So…then why do we have some many panels at events? Two reasons….

#1. They're the go-to format for meeting organizers when they're not really sure what they want content-wise.

> "Uh, someone could talk about….um...trends…or…multiple approaches to…common issues…I guess. Hey, we could do a panel. Great idea, a panel."

So, what's happening is…*insert panel, hope for miracle.* What miracle? That somehow this amazing content is just going to materialize from un-prepped panelists. That's reason one.

#2. The *other* reason meeting organizers create panels is…optimism. Every once in a while, a panel ACTUALLY IS "amazing." And everyone talks about it. Wasn't that panel "amazing?" Yes, you're right it was "amazing." All the panelists answers were…" amazing." And the moderator was…"amazing". And the questions, how did they come up with those? They were…"amazing."

This amaaaazing panel phenomenon is as rare as a unicorn sighting. But what it does is…give us hope. "Maybe it will happen again!" Um, probably not. Unless we *structure* the panel. By structure I mean using *question formats.* Anyone can simply ask panelist *standard questions*. None of us need help with that.

What most of us DO need help with is discovering *different* ways of asking and getting answers from panelists. So that they spill in really interesting ways. And that's *precisely* what we're going to cover in this Extreme Panels program - different panel formats.

Now you do NOT want to do all or even most of these formats. You want to *understand* them and why they work. And then choose which ones are a match for your facilitation style and your event audiences' style. Fair enough?

Okay, the first thing you need to do is structure the panel itself. I call this CAST FOR CONTRAST. You are after a diversity of styles and perspectives on your panel.

I say cast, because you're *crafting* a panel of characters. And each character is different from the other and fulfills a different role.

We start with THE SAGE. This is the peer or industry representative that's been doing this for a loooong time. Whatever "this" is. They don't just give information, they give blunt, direct insights. Think of them as a combination of Dr. Phil and Yoda.

The next role to cast is The Relator. They're friendly and people like them. They're a peer the audience can relate to because they're *just like them*…only more successful. They can see themselves in The Relator. And buy into what The Relator is saying because they can envision themselves being just like them…*eventually*.

And the third role you need is… The Wild Card. This is the person your audience looks forward to hearing *each* of their answers. Why? Because they could *say anything*. It could be funny or irreverent, snarky or ingenious…or any combination. But what comes out of their mouth will MOST LIKELY be interesting or surprising. And your audience knows that…and is…anticipating…that.

Okay, after you've cast your panel, it's time to start asking questions. A key technique you <u>must</u> follow is…

START FAST-GIVE HOPE VS. OPENING SELF SABOTAGE

Here's why I say that. How do almost ALL panels start? With an alarmingly complex and open-ended question, right?

Do not do this. But to demonstrate, let's do this. We'll pretend we are facilitating a panel for professional speakers, like say…the National Speakers Association. Our first question goes to fictitious panel member Roberta.

　"So, Roberta, what do you think is the biggest, most common, and perhaps most dangerous financially-oriented mistake the majority of professional speakers make during their first five years that they should definitely consider avoiding…if

forewarned by more experienced speakers that they meet in NSA? And please provide examples."

Now Roberta, being the first to speak, goes on and on and on. Why? Because you dared her to! She wants to add value as quickly as possible, and (probably) establish her dominance right away over the other panelists. When Roberta's finally done ("And that's what I think") the audience is worried…and rightly so. Because almost all moderators feel the need for EVERYONE ON THE PANEL to answer the first question. So, Michael (panelist #2), same question, what do you think?

And what happens next? Michael goes, "I *agree* with Roberta. I'd say that…and then HE feels he has to match the length and specificity of what Roberta just pontificated with. And so, Michael goes on and one until he's done ("And that's what I think").

But *now*, after asking two panelists to respond, the moderator can't ignore the third one. So, Amy, what do you think?

And Amy says, "I'd like to _echo_ what Roberta and Michael said, "blah, blah, blah…". Amy doesn't want to be out-answered by the previous panelists, so she drones on and on, exactly matching the length of time of each of the previous panelists until at long last she's done. ("And that's what I think").

Oh, this panel has gotten ugly. And we just got started. Agree and Echo are words you rarely want to hear on a panel. But the real problem is that the first question, JUST ONE QUESTION, likely sucked up 15 to 20 minutes out of the 45 minutes or hour you have *for the whole thing.*

This makes the audience do QUESTION MATH. What's QUESTION MATH? Total time divided by number of questions and panelists…estimated by what JUST happened with the first question. The audience is collectively thinking…"We're only going to get to about four questions this whole time. How boring."

The audience is now against you…the moderator. They have abandoned hope. You self-sabotaged your panel with the opening question. But you can avoid that with the **Start Fast-Give Hope** technique.

You ask a tight question and listen carefully and WAIT…poised like a panther on a tree…ready to pounce in with a follow-on WHY question the nano-second there's a pause. And then you Ask For Contrast. Let's demonstrate this.

>"Roberta, what's the biggest financial mistake most speakers make during their first 1-2 years?"
>"Uh, I'd have to say spending too much on their first demo video."
>"Really, why is that? Why do they do that?"

"Well, they're told that's how they'll get booked. No video, no gigs."

THEN, you immediately go for your contrast question.

"Michael, is Roberta right?"
"No, the BIGGEST mistake is spending too much on a website."
"Amy, who's right? Roberta or Michael? Or are neither of them right?"
"They're close, but the real problem is spending too much on marketing before the emerging speaker even knows what they heck they're area of expertise is going to be. Until you have that locked in, everything else is a bad investment. Too soon."

And scene. How long was that? About 60-90 seconds. How many questions were asked? Six. **We just started fast.** And we gave the audience HOPE that this panel is going to be interesting. Why? Because panelists are already disagreeing and mixing it up. The audience hasn't even THOUGHT to do the QUESTION MATH. It's ON.

Next key principle:

QUESTION SOURCING SOURCES
Panels are all about questions. And you don't want the moderator creating and asking them all. So, here's how to fix that. You can pull questions from a huge variety of sources other than you the moderator.

Here are nine of them. But that's just a start. One or two will be the right match for you and your style:
1. Question cards (can color code by topic, ex. Green for $$$$)
2. Emailed questions (sent in ahead of time, different vibe)
3. Smartphone submitted questions
4. Polling questions with remotes (TT, will demo)
5. Raise your hand LIVE questions
6. Panelist to Panelist questions (demo)
7. Designated questioners (leader, popular person, etc.)
8. Random questioners (eye contact, wearing blue, draw name)
9. Foam Frisbee selection

Now, that last technique probably made you curious. Here's how it works. You buy a FOAM frisbee (very important to use foam and not hard plastic) and you zip it into your audience. But before you do that you explain, "If the frisbee hits you, congratulations you get to ask a question of any panelist. If you *catch it,* you have a choice. You can ask a question or make the person sitting to your left or right ask one *instead* of you."

When you say that, the entire audience goes "ooooooooh." Things just got really

interesting. All sorts of audience dynamics are going on. Those in the front are thinking, "You're not going to throw it right into our face. We're fine. But it's doing to be weird having it fly over our heads." In the way back, they're thinking, "You can't throw a frisbee more than 20 thirty yards…I mean, it's not like you're a beach bum from California." The folks in the middle are thinking, "Yeah…that's coming right to us. Better be ready."

All of these thoughts happen in seconds. And you have your audience hooked. It doesn't matter what the next question is going to be, because the FORMAT for getting that question asked, is inherently interesting. Your question sourcing SOURCE is doing all the work for you.

MORE SOURCING TECHNIQUES – HOT SEAT FRAMING
Another way to get questions sourced is enhanced by the framing. Here's an example.

Hot Seat is about branding and creating an intentionally provocative expectation. We state that the 4x6 index cards at participant tables or on the seats are for special "hot seat" questions.

These are questions that are so pointed, so blunt, so relevant that they will make the panelists squirm. I have done this multiple times with my clients. It's extremely empowering to the audience. And, as long as the questions are answered, they boost the respect for the panelists.

As the moderator, you pull from this pile of questions and pose them to panelists. This is a way to add drama. No holds barred. No filters. However, it's wise to scan them and pick the good ones.

Now, you can also make some adjustments to increase their impact. Variations:

- Can be anonymous (makes them edgier)

- Offer Pass Cards (you give each panelist a "pass card" which allows them the right to once pass on a hot seat question if they choose and have the panelist to their left or right answer instead of them).

- Brainstorm at tables to create the "hottest" most relevant question

Alright, here's another question format. I call it…**The Story Problem**
Everyone likes a story, especially when it's a train wreck. So, to get your panel to answer with a story, you first frame up a problem that audience members are experiencing. Then you reframe that problem into a question that requires a story for the panelist to answer.

"Tell us about a time when you…"
"Give us an example of when you…"
"When did you find yourself in a position where you had to…"

Make sense? Let's demonstrate this.

QUESTION
"So, Roberta, give us an example of when you posted something online *professionally* and it went bad. It could be people took it the wrong way. You said something you shouldn't. You commented on another speaker's post and they took offense. You got trolled. You got political. This could be a blog, Facebook, YouTube…whatever."

Roberta answers. Now, as a moderator, you can decide that this is a ONE AND DONE question. Or…you can keep going. It could be that Roberta's answer was awesome. It could be that the audience was into it. Or the answer wasn't so great, and you want to try again. It's a judgement call. In this case, I'll ask another.

"So, Michael, tell us about a time when right after a speech the client told you your speech wasn't good enough…*or wasn't what they were expecting.* And what you said in the moment when they told you that."

That question is going to feature vulnerability by Michael. And the audience is going to like and respect him MORE for sharing that.

What you're doing is humanizing your panelists. You put them into a position where they are being vulnerable, charming or self-deprecating. But you can also turn this into a going-forward-I learned-from-this lesson if their story problem was a train wreck.

"So, Michael, after that happened, how did you bounce back or change to deal with their right or wrong judgment about your speech?"

You can imagine how interesting that response is going to be. And now…more techniques.

Poll the Panel
This is a tempo-changing format. It's perfect for when you've been getting several normal length answers from panelists. You want to mix it up. So, you *poll the panel.* That means restricting HOW they can answer so that their responses are SO short you can ask multiple questions *rapidly*.

Variation: Rate From 1 – 10
Here's how this works. Still using our fictitious professional speaker panel, you would say… "On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest…how would you rate your own current speaker website?" Then you would ask a rapid series of questions

to the full panel. You ask the question once, and each panelist consecutively answers. Questions would be like these five:

1. How would you rate your own current speaker demo reel?
2. How big a problem is speakers lying about their backgrounds or qualifications in their bios?
3. How big a problem is speakers stealing stories and examples from other speakers?
4. How generous are senior NSA Houston members in responding to requests from newer speakers to "pick their brain" on a subject?
5. How attractive do you think the moderator of this panel is?

In about 75 seconds, you would cover five questions and answers.

Variation: Yes, No, Maybe
You can use the exact same approach with a variation. Their *only* answer options are one of those three words.

1. Have you ever forgotten to book airfare for a gig and only realized it the night before?
2. Do you almost always spend a CONSIDERABLE amount of time choosing what you are going to wear onstage?
3. Have you ever accidentally said the wrong client company name onstage during a speech?
4. Have you ever called a client CEO or President the wrong name onstage during a speech?
5. Have you ever accidentally or purposely let loose with the F-bomb onstage?
6. Have you ever awkwardly hugged a client just as you were realizing they were actually leaning in for a hand shake?
7. Has a client or audience member ever asked you out on a date?
8. Have you ever WANTED to go out on a date with a client or audience member?
9. Have you ever had to "go" so bad during a client conference call that you put your phone on mute and did your business while still listening?
10. Have you ever accidentally quoted your fee *incorrectly higher*…and when the prospect surprisingly said yes…you just went with it?
11. Roberta, is there a particular question you've been worried I was going to ask and are relieved I didn't?
12. Would you like to share what that question is?

You just asked 12 questions and received 12 answers in less than 90 seconds!

Variation: Next Week, Next Month, Next Year

This is variation to poll the panel is more of an advice opportunity. On a topic, the panelist says what someone in the audience should consider doing next week, next month or next year.

Variation: FIVER
No, this variation is about not the online freelancer website. In this variation, you ask the panel a question and their answer *must* be delivered in exactly five words. And yes, we encourage the panelists to count on their fingers. This tends to result in an intriguing mixture of short responses…given slowly and thoughtfully.

"What's the fastest way for speakers to make money?"
"What are you working on right now in your own speaker business?"
"What is your demo video missing that you wish it had?"
"What would you like to see happen more with the NSA NYC chapter?"

One Breath Rule
Okay, this question format is a bit…odd. That's intentional. Here's how you deliver it. "Okay panelists, I will ask each one of you a question. You will get to answer as long as you like…in one breath." When you say this, the panelists presume you are kidding. So, the first panelist starts responding and then takes a breath at a normal time. You FORCEFULLY interrupt and say, "Stop, you took a breath. Thank you. Next." They will look at you in surprise. But the next panelist is immediately reassessing how they are going to respond. They try to say as much as they can until they have to take a breath. You ratchet up the tension by leaning in next to them, waiting to jump in the nanosecond they take a breath. The third panelist is the one who truly "gets it" and completes a response before taking a breath. Audience members LOVE this technique. But you can only use it once.

Panelist to Panelist
Often the panelists know each other…or their reputations. So, by making things fun for the panelists it makes it fun for the audience. A way to do that is to give a panelist the opportunity to another panelist a question.
- Amy…what have you always wanted to ask Michelle?
- Roberta, what would you like to ask Amy?
- Michelle, what would you like to ask Roberta?

Panelist to Audience Member
Another way to make it fun for the panelists and thus everyone else…is to let a panelist turn the tables and ask an audience member a question.

"Amy, who in the audience would you like to ask a question of? What is your question?"

Progressive Answers

This technique is like the improv game "Pillars". You, as the moderator, ask a panelist a question. At any time during their answer you yell "pause," and then point to ANOTHER panelist, who then picks up the answer where the previous panelist left off. You repeat with new questions as long as it is interesting and relevant. Once it starts to just get weird, you stop.

Lightning Round
This is another tempo-changing format. Unlike polling the panel, you ask each panelist a question *sequentially*. You don't limit their answer because the *questions themselves* call for a fast response. Here are sample questions:

- How often should a speaker update their demo video?
- How often should a speaker update their website home page?
- How often should a speaker update their entire website?
- How often should a speaker update their headshot?
- How often should a speaker update their LinkedIn profile?

Now, as a moderator you can mix things up by challenging the answer. You can also create contrast by asking other panelists if a previous answer sounded right to them.

The Question Behind the Question (or the "real" question")
This is the opposite of a Lightning Round. It's about *purposely slowing things down*…and taking a deeper look into a question. It's a format that requires some advanced preparation.

Here's how it works. You ask a panelist a question the panelist knows they're going to get. However, rather than answer it, they say, "Actually, let's answer the question BEHIND the question." The idea is...the panelist shows their insight and expertise by pushing to reveal what is REALLY being asked is...and THEN they answer it.

"So, Michelle, when should a speaker realize they should be spending a lot more on their marketing?"

MICHELLE: "Actually, let's ask the question BEHIND the question. Why isn't the speaker getting enough gigs now from their marketing?"

Michelle then proceeds with an interesting and insightful answer.

Variation: Question Behind the Question Phrased by You
You, as the moderator, take a LIVE question from an audience member, and then re-frame it with the question behind the question…and THEN gives it to a panelist.

You do this when YOU want to establish some credibility. But you should only do this IF you have the skill to think on your feet. You also…can simply plant the question. It's scripted…sure…but it's in service of the audience. They get to hear a more thoughtful,

deeper question.

Polling for Questions
This format is all about the audience being in charge. You put up three different questions onscreen…and let the audience use polling remotes (or smartphone polling app) to choose which question THEY want asked.

Question set 1
1. What liability insurance coverage do you buy every year?
2. Have you ever had a wardrobe malfunction onstage?
3. If you could instantly be an expert in another field, what would you choose and why?

Follow on…who should answer?
1. Panelist on the left
2. Panelist in the center
3. Panelist on the right

Question set 2
1. If you could have a do-over for your business, what would it be?
2. What's the top value you've gotten from NSA membership?
3. Besides a book, what's a great add-on product for a speaker to sell?

Follow on…who should answer?
1. Panelist on the left
2. Panelist in the center
3. Panelist on the right

Variation: Would You Rather?
With this variation, you ask the audience a Would You Rather question…with two options. And they choose. Here are examples…

Would you rather Panelist on the left told us about…
- The biggest mental barrier speakers have to overcome or…
- Their *own* mental limiting block they're working on?

Would you rather Panelist in the center told us about…
- Their favorite business app on his phone right now or…
- The guilty pleasure TV show their embarrassed to admit in front of all of you that they like to watch?

Would you rather Panelist on the Right told us about…
- How long they spend deciding what to wear before a speech? or…

- How long they spending working on their speech before they deliver it?

Would you I asked all the panelists …
- The biggest audience they ever presented to or…
- The lowest fee (more than free) they accepted in the last ten years?

30-Second Rant
This technique is a great way to close a panel discussion. You give each panelist the opportunity to "rant" on any pet peeve for 30 seconds. Use an onscreen countdown clock to ensure precision in getting it all done in 30 seconds. It's best to prepare the panelists ahead of time for this format. After each rant, the audience tends to spontaneously applaud. After the last one, you thank the panel, and conclude.

Making the World Safer for Panels
Thank you for taking the time to read through this program. As an *Extreme Emcee*, I want to support everyone designing and facilitating panels, as well as panelists, in sharing cogent, relevant and engaging insights onstage. If you employ even a few of these techniques, you will help make the world safer for panels. That's not quite world peace, but it helps!

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