

Hosting A Successful Virtual Panel Meeting



We've heard from some customers that their association chapter members find their panel events more dynamic and engaging than those with a single speaker, as they bring a variety of perspectives and ideas to a discussion around a single issue.



As Chrissie Gonzales, President and Media Relations Chair for Northern Michigan Association of Health Underwriters, says: "NMAHU moved to virtual meetings throughout the pandemic and had great success hosting a HR panel. We had three HR leaders from our area join our members via Zoom to discuss topics like how benefits impact attraction and retention of employees; how the pandemic has changed the way their HR team operates; how they rely on their agent to be a trusted resource and partner; and new ways they've had to get creative in their field to manage the growing needs of team members. We had great feedback following the event with a number of members reaching just to thank us for hosting the event. A lot of good information was shared!"

When you bring together the right presenters, the audience hears differing opinions and gets a broader knowledge about a subject than they might if they only heard from a single speaker. With the complexities that can accompany an event involving multiple participants and multiple locations, association chapter panel sessions can sometimes be complicated to manage and execute. But the outcomes are worth the work. Here are a few things to keep in mind as you plan your next association chapter panel event, to make it the best it can be and the most engaging for attendees.

Planning a successful association chapter panel discussion

A lot goes into planning a successful virtual event with a single speaker, including planning the event and the flow, finding the speaker, coordinating volunteers, etc. The same apply to events with multiple speakers. Panel events multiply those tasks several fold and add a few additional ones, when you're dealing with multiple people in multiple locations. Be sure you have a big enough group of volunteers so that several people aren't doing everything. Keep in mind that many of these tasks can be done virtually, so you don't have to meet in person every time you need to check in.

Start early. Pull together your association chapter volunteers as early as possible. Start by discussing and documenting your high-level plan and direction, so everyone has the same understanding of what needs to be done and knows who's responsible for each task. Assign tasks to different people so that a single person isn't burdened with a large task like finding and coordinating all the speakers. Also, start any marketing early on, to build buzz and get the word out about who will be speaking and what you'll be covering to get people interested and registering early.

Set your objectives. What do you want attendees to take away from the event? Is this for education? Advocacy? Mental health? Decide your outcomes and be sure all your volunteers are working toward those same objectives. Check in regularly to keep everyone on the same path.

Choose the right moderator. Look for someone who enjoys working with multiple people, is engaging to listen to and is good at keeping a conversation on track – and bringing it back if it goes off the rails.

Select the panelists. Who are the right people to meet your objectives? Ask potential panelists how they feel about being part of a panel. Some speakers prefer to be on their own, which won't work for what you're trying to do. As you look at potential panelists, consider:

- Expertise. What level of knowledge do your panelists need to have?
- Diversity. The panel should represent your audience, in demographics and perspectives.
- Communication. The people you choose should be good speakers who can speak off-the-cuff, stay calm and interact well with others who may not share their views.

If you have time, have a joint virtual conversation with all the panelists to give them a chance to get to know each other. Share the questions the moderator plans to ask and anything you want them to be sure to cover. You don't want overprepared panelists, which can seem stiff, so give them enough of an idea of what you'll cover to keep the conversation flowing.



Test your technology. If the technology you choose won't let presenters easily communicate with each other and interact with your audience, your hard work will be wasted. Use a platform that will effectively support your audience, your presenters, and all that's going on behind-the-scenes. Testing should include confirming they plan to use microphones/headphones that provide quality audio.

On the day of your virtual panel

Have panelists log in early, to get comfortable and give you time to check the technology. Have a volunteer available and ready to troubleshoot and step in where needed, before and during the event. It's also good to have a volunteer to manage the chat, to surface any questions or problems that arise.

Have a plan for your virtual event, and you'll have a better chance of giving your audience what they want without any major obstacles. And a conversation they'll remember for all the right reasons.

