CONNECTING WITH SARAH

Moderating a Panel, Part 1
When you are the host, or moderator, you represent the audience’s interests and relationship to the material and the speakers. You are also expected to help your guest speakers to come across clearly and well to the audience.

Opening
Begin with two intro remarks about the discussion’s focus. Mention what everyone wants to know and why, and include yourself in being very interested. Avoid becoming academic; instead address what’s at stake from the audience’s point of view. (For example, don’t just address different sales approaches, talk about the drama of competing, and beating your rivals as well.)

After your introductory remarks, introduce your speakers, ideally bringing them on stage one at a time, so that you can greet each one personally; then have them walk behind you to take their seat. Once they’re all seated, say “Welcome,” and being applauding. State your agenda, how you’ll use your time, and set your ground rules with the audience. Be positive: “I’ll ask our panelists to keep your openings to the allotted five minutes, and audience, please keep your comments and questions brief so that we have plenty of time to hear from as many of you as possible.”

Discussion vs. Debate
If you’re moderating a debate, don’t reveal which side you’re on, and repeat only the conclusions the speakers make in order to prompt another speaker to begin. Openly wonder about any inconsistencies you hear, or ask how one person’s statement reconciles with another’s seemingly opposite point of view. Explore what events or thinking may have lead the speakers to their opinions – their stories will both enlighten and entertain.

If someone is going on too long, gently cut him off: “John, let’s have you hold right there so we can get Jim’s point on that.” “Ok, Susan, let me stop you there so I can ask the audience to react.” “Hold on, Sean, and let me ask the other panelists to weigh in on this point for a moment...(repeat one brief statement).”

To a questioner who’s dragging, "Sir, I interrupt only to save time for others; May I have your question?" Or, "Let’s have our panelists react to that statement...Is that the right approach, or is that wrong?" "Please, ma’am, your question?” The point is to make sure you’re moderating the quality of the dialogue, so that speakers are clearly heard and not misunderstood, and that audience members are allowed to ask a variety of questions.

Closing
If the panel was inserted into your time as part of your speaking appearance, and it’s appropriate for you to speak longer after they exit, thank them on closing the panel. Thank them after your panelists and you draw your conclusions if the panel is the main event.

To close, summarize what the audience will likely take away, both the thoughts as well as the actions, for example: “It’s fair to say this discussion should and will continue in our industry, as more and different organizations experiment with the approaches we’ve heard from the earliest adopters.” Or leave them with one dramatic statement: “We’ve at least agreed on one critical point, that building smart teams is the clearest roadmap to high performance.” And last, “I’d like to thank our distinguished panelists for their time and their candor, and thank you to our audience for your thoughtful questions and your gracious attention. Good night, everyone.”