

**“SO, YOU ARE GOING TO BE
A CONVENTION SESSION MODERATOR”
A GUIDE FOR ACI CONVENTION PARTICIPANTS**

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Background

ACI hosts two conventions a year, each in a different city in North America. Every convention is attended by about 1200 people, who for the most part, have technical backgrounds in civil engineering and construction related subjects which surround the main theme of CONCRETE. While many of the attendees are hardened veterans of many past conventions, others will be newcomers, students, and "significant others." They will attend the convention for various reasons: some to participate in the more than 250 committees which are preparing consensus documents on the various aspects of concrete technology, others will be there to obtain the latest information being presented at the almost 40 sessions, and all will participate in the various business and social events that are held throughout the week.

All of the participants have several things in common:

- Their time is valuable and they choose to attend the activities of most interest to them out of the many alternatives underway simultaneously at the convention.
- They have paid to participate and they expect to receive some benefit.

Conception of Your Session

This paper will not dwell on the details that must occur far out in front of "your session." Rest assured that considerable effort has been expended, primarily by the sponsoring committee and its chairman, by the time you are six months away or one convention before your session.

Briefly recapping the events that led up to this point:

- The sponsoring committee/chairman anticipated about two years before that their consensus document would be completed and/or the committee had collected knowledge that they wished to share with others in a technical session.
- A tentative program was established and it was continually updated as the vision materializes.
- A projection was made about the amount of information that needed to be conveyed and whether 1, 2, or 3 (or more) sessions were needed. Adjustments were made for the audience interest related to the location of the convention and the timeliness of the subject. (For example, a session on Freezing Damage to Concrete held in San Juan in late April may be a poor choice.)
- A request was made to TAC or EAC for tentative approval for the session(s).
- TAC or EAC provided input to the Convention Committee (CC) to establish the convention agenda. About a year and a half (3 conventions out) before a convention the program is relatively fixed.
- At the request of the Convention Department, the Committee will have supplied the names/address of the Session Moderator, who, in turn, will provide a tentative list of speakers/subjects.
- With less than a year to go to "your session," the Convention Department of ACI will send to the Session Moderator an instruction packet that provides the list of requirements, forms, guidance, and tips for you and your speakers. Most of the requested information is needed for preparing the pre-convention publicity packages.
- If you and the committee have opted to issue a call for papers, you will have had to prepare it to allow adequate time for publication, responses, and evaluation/selection of the final presentations.
- Also, if you and the committee are hoping to publish the papers either as a collection or as future separates, a request must be made to headquarters and steps taken to assure adequate technical

review. If a preprint volume is requested in the (Special Publication) series, details must be worked out with headquarters well in advance of the session(s) because TAC or EAC review is needed.

You have been honored by your colleagues who have selected or confirmed you to be the Session Moderator (SM) for a particular session. The honor carries with it an obligation to make the session an outstanding success. The measures of your accomplishment will be in terms of:

- The interest it generates (audience size).
- How smoothly it runs without distracting incidents.
- The amount of information communicated between the speakers and the audience.
- The number of compliments you receive at the conclusion. (At-a-boy's vs. Aw shucks!)

To fulfill your obligations, you will have to wear many hats: Promoter, Solicitor, Producer, Director, Liaison to headquarters, Actor, Prompter, Timekeeper, Enforcer, Interpreter, Stagehand, Sound/light Technician, and Jack-of-all-trades, as conditions warrant. Alternatively, you can be the "General" and direct other volunteers. It is highly recommended that you share the duties and try not to be a "one-man show." At the very least, if you have not enlisted the help of others up until the session commences, request someone from the audience to attend to the lights, sound, and projector when the hotel/management has not provided someone to handle these duties. Remember, however, that even if you share some of the responsibilities with others, it is your reputation that is at stake.

Prior to Six Months of Your Session

You now have a list of your speakers and all the pertinent information to put together you have probably had verbal contact with them to share your thoughts about how their presentation fit into the theme of the session. You also alerted them to possible areas of overlap so that duplication can be avoided. You explained that ACI does not pay their travel, other expenses, or waive registration fees for speakers. You obtain their commitment to participate.

You have submitted your agenda and speaker information to the Convention Committee and they (probably) gave final approval for that session's program. On rare occasions, because of special events (Report on recent earthquake, etc.) or changes in the hotel (renovations, room configurations, etc.), it may be necessary to make changes in the programs.

You have discussed the agenda at your sponsoring committee's meeting to surface any potential conflicts and problems. This should be a formal committee agenda item with the session moderator, Y O U , leading the discussion. Take advantage of the fact that this is probably the last meeting you have with your committee colleagues before "your session" is presented at the next convention. Ask for, or have the chairman assign, helpers to publicize the event and to conduct the session. With respect to publicity and attracting an audience to "your session," answer the following questions and use them to contact possible audiences:

1. Who from the committee will probably attend? Can they bring others from their organizations?
2. Who will contact the local universities (Civil Engineering. Depts.)?
3. Who will get items in the trade and professional newsletters?

It is amazing how much free publicity one can get, especially through WEB linkages. The basic mission of ACI is education, and the better we do our jobs, the better chance we have of raising the "quality of concrete" and the "State of the Practice."

One way to generate interest in your session is to invite a famous expert on the subject to present a short keynote address and present him with an award. The session might be named in his honor. Most trade magazines pick up on these newsworthy items. These must be cleared with your committee and ACI.

With respect to obtaining help from your fellow committee members, the assignment details will be covered in a later section of this paper.

During the Six Months Before "Your Session"

At this time you need to be in "command of the event." Most importantly, you need to continually check with your speakers to see that they are working on their papers/presentations. This is best done diplomatically by calling to give them information (and casually closing by saying "how are your slides coming along?") or by establishing a calendar for submission of an abstract, a four page summary, copies of the slides, a copy of the full paper, etc.

Secondly, you need to keep headquarters informed by submitting the requested program information, telling them about any changes or problems, and requesting the appropriate visual aids projection equipment. If everything is going smoothly, call them and tell them so -- it helps them sleep better at night, knowing, rather than hoping that forty some sessions are coming together!

Thirdly, you need to report back to your speakers what is happening. Tell them:

1. What you expect from them. (Inform, persuade the audience.)
2. Your calendar of expected submissions.
3. Your criteria for judging their submissions.
4. Details about the session:
 - a. Time and place of the meeting.
 - b. Pre-session activities to go over final details, or training on the audio visual equipment.
 - c. Agenda, schedule and the need or procedures to stay on schedule.
 - d. Purpose of the session.
 - e. Size and layout of the room.
 - f. Audience details:
 - Size
 - Interests
 - Knowledge
 - Anticipated questions/results
 - Evaluations.
 - g. How the meeting will be run.
 - h. Use of lighting, pointers, audio equipment and projectors, and how to signal for assistance.
 - i. The location and use of the speaker ready room.

The information you can convey to your speakers prior to the session will make it easier to conduct your session. However, don't think that they will read what you send them. Much of the above information should be repeated at the breakfast before the session or in the meeting room an hour before "Your Session" gets underway.

Motivating Your Speakers

As you approach the day of the session, you will have developed a "feel" for how your speaker will do.

1. Some speakers will be "self actuated" and will do a good job with or without your prodding. Give them a pat on the back and get out of the way!
2. Some will do a decent job because their bosses have told them to (with or without your prodding). They are reluctant, but they fear the consequences of a poor performance. You may need to keep them on schedule by working through their bosses.

3. The last group is that of the reluctant speakers. They may or may not show up! These are the ones you need to spend your time on:
 - The busy executive/expert who is running fast and hard, and wants to be there, but the press of other business prevents adequate preparation or may even prevent his/her showing up. You need to keep nagging to make sure things are on schedule. You also need to make contact at the latest time to get assurance of attendance. [If possible, have a backup presenter available.]
 - The novice speaker who wants to participate, but lacks the confidence and skills necessary to do it. You must be a teacher, assistant, mentor, prompter, and coach. Keep building the speaker's confidence with the words like "You can do it!" and will help you.
 - The overly nervous speaker who has a story to tell, but is devastated by public speaking; or has a handicap; or may not speak English very well. Many of these speakers revert to reading their speeches. In some cases, you can get someone to present the paper. In others, you can help him or her prepare excellent, legible slides that tell the story with little talk from the presenter. You need to provide a lot of assistance to this speaker!

It should be obvious that you, as Session Moderator, need to have contact with your speakers to determine what their needs are, how to "stroke" or help them, and to get a "feel" for who may not show up and plan accordingly. You must keep in contact with your speakers. The earlier they prepare their talks and preprints, the better the chances for quality slides. You are expected to control the quality of visual aids used by the speakers. It is your prerogative to request a preview of the slides and, if necessary, cull out poor slides and request replacements. Constructive criticism with instructions for preparation of good slides should be used. Detailed information is available from ACI and others.

The Day of Your Session

Meet with your speakers prior to the session to present your ground rules (breakfast?) and to be sure they arrived. Among the items to be covered are:

- How you will pronounce names.
- The schedule and introductions.
- How to handle questions.
- How to keep on time.
- Any scheduling conflicts that speakers may have with other events under way in other rooms.
- Preprint policies.
- Assistance on slides (Speakers Room)

Meet in the session room with your speakers and assistants about one hour before the start to set up:

- Signals for lights, slides, loudness, etc.
- Test the equipment (mikes, pointer, timer, etc.).
- Last minute conflicts.

You should also be concerned with safety:

- Cover cords to avoid tripping
- Keep chairs/tables away from the edges of the podium. (Remember Mrs. Reagan falling off a podium at a State dinner!)
- Be sure fire exits remain clear.

Know how to call for emergency assistance. Sometimes speakers collapse. (Remember Mr. Daley collapsing at his introduction by the President as the Secretary of Commerce Designee in Jan. 1997.)

Show Time!

You have done your homework and everything looks like it will be smooth sailing. The room is laid out to your satisfaction for safety and for your audience to come and go (with adequate chair space) as the various papers will be presented. Your co-chairman and assistants are in place and are familiar with the appropriate signals for

- Dimming/raising the light level.
- Correcting sound levels.
- Quelling outside noise.
- Making/arranging/handling seating problems.
- Running errands to hotel management or ACI staff.
- Getting audience seated after coffee breaks.

Additionally, the preprints are in place so that they can be picked up by the audience without disrupting speakers.

All of your speakers are accounted for and have been briefed on your procedures and the audiovisual aids. The slide trays have been properly lined up and identified. A projectionist is in place and someone has a flashlight, screwdriver, and tweezers to correct any slide jams, (I always carry my own.). You also have designated one or more audience members to count attendees and evaluate the speakers/program for your future use in making improvements.

If a speaker is missing, you have alerted a substitute who can fill in. ACI requires that presentations be made in the allotted time slots. You should not collapse the program when a speaker does not show up. You can take a recess if you do not have a substitute.

Start your meeting on time and stay on time. ACI has timers available if you want one. Be aware of the effects of outside distractions, such as the coffee bar, and stay in control. When starting or reconvening after breaks, do not jump into presenting items of importance. Upon hearing your voice, the audience will move for their seats and probably will not be able to hear for 20-30 seconds. Jokes, if in good taste, secondary announcements, etc., may be appropriate at this time. Explain about the preprints.

If the program has been changed, mention it as often as practical. Remember, your audience may be moving from session to session. Your function is to maintain order and to facilitate the communication between the speakers and the audience. Without being overly disruptive, you must do whatever is necessary to facilitate communication such as:

- Interrupt the program/speaker to correct mike, light, noise, or projector difficulties.
- Cut off speakers/discussion if overly long or disruptive.
- Request the speaker to move on, speak more clearly, speak more slowly, etc.
- Quell any local discussions in the audience that could be disruptive to others in the audience.
Request that the discussions be moved outside of the session room.

Remember that listening is difficult. Only ten percent of that which is heard is retained under the best conditions. Fifty percent of that visually experienced is retained. Listening intensity decreases with time. A person cannot concentrate for much longer than an hour. If possible, plan breaks every one or 1½ hours during the session, but maintain control in reconvening the audience.

Do not monopolize the podium. Keep your introductions and remarks brief. Do not insult your speakers or put down or translate his presentation. Only add positive comments, such as, "additional study of this problem was just initiated at XYZ if anyone is interested in following developments." Or indicate where in ACI additional information can be found.

Time allotted per speaker is usually 30 minutes with 20 minutes for the talk and 10 minutes for questions. Do not allow questions during the talk as they may confuse the train of thought of the speaker, or go off on a tangent. Do not hesitate to tell the speaker that the time is up. Entertain questions after each speaker because of audience turnover. The fellow with a question may not be there to ask it at the end of a session.

You should assist the speaker in meeting his/her time allotment. Although "reading" a paper is discouraged, it takes at least two minutes to read a typed double-spaced page. Simple slides take at least 20 seconds to be interpreted by the audience. If complex or with material to be read, they take considerably longer.

You should have emphasized to your speakers when you were putting the program together, that an unintelligible presentation to a group is a waste of time. Since the audience expects to learn something, it is a discourtesy to waste the audience's time.

Be careful of visual aids other than slides/motion pictures.

- Blackboards/flip charts/pass outs/overhead projectors normally are not adequate for ACI session size rooms.
- Slides demand more organization from your speaker (although they lack some of the flexibility/informality that overhead projectors can create).
- Computer driven projects are now greatly improved but it seems to be that few speakers can rise above the detail at their fingertips to do a good job. Presently, ACI needs to make special arrangements for using computerized graphics, and rental projectors command a premium price. This will be the media of the future and may predominate in meetings in about five years. Presently, the only advice is "if you/speakers know what you are doing -- go for it!" It will make previewing a presentation much easier.

You must control the podium during questioning. Request the identity of the inquirer. Repeat questions, if necessary. Shut off extraneous questions and do not allow the program to go off on a tangent. For specific detailed questions, ask the inquirer to meet with the speaker after the session. Be extra careful to lead questioners to the special microphones that are used for recording sessions.

Thank your speakers and, if possible, present them with a small memento of the event. ACI might supply coffee cups or neckties, or you might purchase some appropriate gift. Thank the audience and thank all your helpers who made the session a success.

Follow-Up

You're not done yet! Send thank you letters to your speakers and their supervisors. If appropriate and tactful, present a summary or a copy of the session evaluation to the speakers. Send the session summary to ACI with any suggestions for improving future sessions. Finally, present a summary to your sponsoring committee with any suggestions.

You may get correspondence after the session about what was presented. Such inquiries should probably be directed to the speakers who might wind up enhancing their business. This is one of the side benefits of being a voluntary speaker at an ACI convention, and we should all do all we can to promote concrete education.

GOOD LUCK ON YOUR NEXT SESSION!

References

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