

Dear AIB 2004 Discussant:

Thank you very much for agreeing to be a discussant for a session at the 2004 Academy of International Business meetings.

We are less than 60 days away from the beginning of our annual conference in Stockholm. Many people have worked very hard to review submissions, create exciting panels and generally deal with the hundreds of details involved with putting together an international conference. And of course you have already made a major contribution by agreeing to be a discussant, one of the critical roles in any conference.

Now, we have to work to make the sessions the best they can be.

Other than that, you can reach the basic travel information about Stockholm in the AIB web page: <http://aib.msu.edu/events/2004/TravelInformation.asp> As announced before, all registration and hotel details can be found on the AIB conference web page as well: <http://aib.msu.edu/events/2004/> Also, please remember that the AIB regulations require all presenters to be members of the Academy.

Here are some suggestions first written and prepared by **Lorraine Eden** of Texas A&M University for the 2002 Program. We are sure many of you are very experienced at being a discussant at an AIB conference, for others this will be a first time experience. In either case, we hope you find these suggestions helpful, as many did in the last years. If you have comments (criticisms, additions) please email us at aib2004@sabanciuniv.edu.

1. GET ALL THE PAPERS, HANDOUTS AND PRESENTATION MATERIALS AHEAD OF TIME

Please check the details of your session by going to the AIB 2004 website and clicking on: <http://aib.msu.edu/events/2004/PreliminaryProgram.asp> *Please note that updates, changes, and corrections continue to be made. Please help us by reviewing your entries and sending any corrections to aib2004@sabanciuniv.edu or aib@aib.msu.edu*

Please download the information for your session (you can COPY and PASTE the text into MS WORD). You can download the copies of MS's by using the manuscripts' ID numbers which are written in parenthesis in the detailed program, from <http://frontpage.cbs.dk/aib2004/getmanuscript.php>

Please read the papers ahead of time, at the very latest, on the airplane flight to Stockholm. This way, each person can attempt in their presentation to link their papers to the other presentations, making for a more cohesive and stimulating session.

2. THE ROLE OF A DISCUSSANT

The discussant has a critical role to play in a conference session. In many ways, it can be compared to the jobs of a trip guide, interpreter, critic and counselor all wrapped up in one package. You have two key groups that have to be satisfied. First, you are responsible to the audience at the session. They see you as the person who can best provide a road map for research in this area and interpret the papers in the context of that road map. Second, you are responsible to the authors of the papers. They are looking for meaningful and constructive feedback on their papers. You have to do all of this in a very short period of time! What NEITHER group is looking for is for you to talk about YOUR OWN research. That is not the purpose of a discussant! Please retrain from treading down that path.

After the session is over, please do give the paper givers a copy of their papers, with your handwritten notes attached, along with a typed set of comments on the paper. This will make it easier for them to incorporate your comments into any subsequent revision of the paper.

The Academy of Management, at its 1999 conference, had a workshop on improving the effectiveness of AOM sessions. I attach below the specific suggestions they made for the role of discussant, which are quite detailed. I hope you find them useful.

3. EFFECTIVELY MANAGE YOUR PRESENTATION TIME

All sessions are one and one-half hours (90 minutes) long. To figure out how much time you should have for your discussant comments, divide the number of presenters plus 2 (1 for the time used by the discussant and chair, and 1 for the time for Q&A) into the total number of minutes. For example, if there are three presentations, $90/5 = 18$ minutes each. In this case, plan for 15 minutes, so you have a bit of "wiggle room" in case you go a bit longer. If there are four presentations, $90/6 = 25$ minutes each; plan for 12 minutes. Therefore, the rule of thumb for the paper givers is:

- Three papers: 15 minutes each paper
- Four papers: 12 minutes each paper
- Five papers: 10 minutes each paper

I assume the chair takes, at maximum, 2-3 minutes to simply introduce the session and the participants. You should therefore expect to have somewhere between 10 and 15 minutes for discussion.

4. MAKE A QUALITY PRESENTATION

You may want to prepare a short audio-visual presentation of your discussant comments, using an overhead projector. To figure out how many individual overheads you can reasonably present within your time slot, divide the number of minutes you have by two (that is, if you have 15 minutes, prepare no more than 7 or 8 overheads). Your overheads should be printed in a minimum of 18-20 point font (preferably ARIAL as it is easier to read from a distance) in order for your text to be seen from the audience. Do use color if you have access to a color printer. If you are using overheads, you might find it helpful to bring a few blank ones and an overhead marker with you to the conference, in case you want to make changes before the session.

The Academy of Management, at its 1999 conference, had a workshop on improving the effectiveness of AOM sessions. I attach below the specific suggestions they made in terms of WHAT TO present and WHAT NOT to present, in terms of the content of your presentation, which you may find useful.

5. THE AUDIO-VISUAL EQUIPMENT

We will have OVERHEAD PROJECTORS. Unfortunately, we do not yet know whether all conference rooms will be equipped with computer projectors.

6. OTHER SUGGESTIONS RE YOUR PRESENTATION

When I have chaired a session, I have found it helpful to ask the participants in my session to meet 10 minutes BEFORE the session starts so that everyone can be introduced, the equipment can be checked, handouts can be distributed, and so on. Please come early to your own session. At the very least, your arrival relieves the chair of the anxiety of worrying whether you are there or not. It also means the session can start on time.

It also helps to give your session chair and the participants your room number in the hotel, or a telephone number where you can be reached should an emergency occur. If that unwelcome emergency does occur and you cannot make the session, please let your session chair know ASAP as he/she will have to find another discussant (or, more likely, take on the role him/herself). Please also inform the AIB Registration Desk at the conference so the information can be passed along to us.

Please don't delay in making your hotel reservations and registering for the conference.

I look forward to seeing you in Stockholm!

All the best from Istanbul,

Nakiye Boyacigiller
AIB Vice President and 2004 Program Chair
Sabanci University
Dean, Graduate School of Management
Orhanli, Tuzla, Istanbul, 34956 Turkey
Phone: +90 216 483 90 00 Fax: +90 216 483 96 00
Email: aib2004@sabanciuniv.edu

=====

The Role of the Discussant

* Abstracted with permission from "Making AOM Sessions Exciting!" by Jing Zhou (Texas A&M) and Russ Coff (Emory). The report was based on an AOM workshop, August 8, 1999, Chicago, IL, where the panel members were the two co-authors of the report, Sally Blount-Lyon (Chicago), Michael H. Lubatkin (Connecticut), Karl Weick (Michigan) and Edward J. Zajac (Northwestern).

- *Discussant*: Discussants should view their role as tying the papers together and engaging the audience in the session. It is not to do a *stand-up* critique of each paper individually.
- Broadly, discussants should integrate the ideas and, at the same time, encourage audience interaction:
- DON'T do a standard stand-up 'reviewer' routine for each paper one at a time.
- Try to identify shared constructs, linked findings, and contradictory results that emerge across papers
- Try to identify on-going debates, themes, and puzzles within the topic domain and how the group of papers contributes to them.
- What future directions are suggested by the group of papers - are there any holes?
- Turn the task on the audience and facilitate a discussion on how to integrate or take the next steps.

Realistic job preview of discussant role

1. You'll get none of the papers in advance.
2. At the session there will be no time left for you to make your comments.
3. If there is time left, you'll be introduced as the person who will pull all of this together.
4. The audience wants you to sit down so they can ask their questions.
5. It's fun to do because you have a chance to spot connections and you don't have to scramble to write a quasi-paper during the December holidays to get a slot at the annual meeting.

The psychology of a symposium [Eden insert: substitute "session" for "symposium".]

1. Participants want to publicize and call attention to an emerging body of neat stuff. Or they may want to talk to see if among them they may have stumbled onto some neat stuff. Or they want to clear the air on a contentious issue. Symposium is like a special issue of a journal.
2. Part of audience has come to see what speakers look like, some want to learn what all the fuss is about, some should be on the panel rather than in the audience, some have come to give moral support, some want to meet speaker afterward, and some are just tapped out on the convention and want a place to rest.
3. Safest assumption is that participants are thinking what they want to say and are not listening to others, at least not until they give their talk. Thus, the 1st speaker will have heard more of what is said than the 2nd, etc. The first speaker often has been at a different symposium than the last speaker. First speaker is more of an ally for discussant. Because participants are preoccupied with talking rather than listening, they will not have picked up on many connections between the papers. When the discussant mentions some obvious ones, which will usually be the first time the participants have thought of them.
4. Also, because listening may be very uneven, it is a huge help if discussant says what the core idea is in each paper. This is tough and risky. Many papers were written in haste and don't have a core idea (possible remark: "this overview touched on several timely issues but I want to discuss just one.")
5. Participants and the audience as well want the discussant to give a context that makes sense of the papers, be enthusiastic about the work, and improve it by extending it and by making constructive replacements of poorer methods and arguments with better ones. Chances are you weren't their first choice as a discussant. Being a discussant is like being a book reviewer; it's an acquired taste and not a lot of people are eager to do it.

Building the commentary itself

1. Start a folder on the topic right away.

2. Act as if the proposal is all you'll know. Given that title, what might she say? That prediction will be an anchor for you to listen to what they do say.
3. Read their stuff multiple times. Each time you'll see something different because you will have had different intervening experiences and you are a different reader.
4. Have definitions of key terms. Authors may not do this. You can always say, these people are not talking about this phenomenon, as it is usually defined. It is usually defined as X. They ignore x_1 , and they add x_{1+n} . Does that help them or not?
5. Sample leads
 - a. Do you realize who's in trouble if these people are right?
 - b. You can do even more with this argument than what we've heard here. For instance,...
 - c. Notice what these panelists didn't say. They could have asserted that X. They didn't. Why not?
 - d. The predominant citation in these papers is X. What if it had been Y?
 - e. We came to this symposium with assumptions that act as filters to determine our reactions to what we hear. There are at least four reactions people can have: That's absurd (deny assumption), that's interesting (disconfirm weak assumption), that's obvious (affirms assumptions), that's irrelevant (do not speak to assumptions). What is the pattern of reactions to what we have heard?
 - f. Given this topic, I expected these people to say X. Much to my surprise they said Y. What can we make of that?
 - g. Give each panelist a copy of your remarks. You've thought about their work more than most people. Leave your observations with them so that they can think about them in quieter times.

How to cope when you didn't get the papers in advance

- Take notes on 2-column paper so you can write comments in left-hand column. "Remember when she said X. There is a body of data that are inconsistent with that."
- Write key phrases on post-its so can arrange sequence.
- To get your bearings. Why did she title the paper this way? Is there a better title? Is this the correct sequence for these papers?
- Draw audience in: "before we get to your questions, let me ask you in the audience to take on the role of discussant for the moment. What do you think are the big ideas we heard, what surprised you, what's controversial, what will you take away, what symposium should we propose next year?"
- Skim a recent newspaper prior to session. Something in it will have been relevant to the topic. "There is a certain timeliness to these presentations, at least judging from this item in today's NYT."

Possible Questions

1. Should your discussion focus on individual papers and comment on each paper?

Ans: You probably will do this because it's an obvious way to organize the discussion. I usually do this because I like to point out really neat stuff that may have gone unnoticed. Also sometimes, due to time pressure, authors leave out good stuff. I like to use some of my time to put that material on the table. But, if you do go paper by paper, each author expects equal time and if you don't give equal time that feels evaluative (less discussion implies a poorer paper). What is really troublesome is that some papers, often good ones, are self-contained and there just isn't much to say about them. So the implied evaluation is precisely the opposite of the actual evaluation.

2. How to get audience involved?

Ans: That's a non-starter for me. I don't worry about that. They'll wade in when given a chance.

3. Isn't being a discussant just the same as being a manuscript reviewer?

Ans: Probably, but it shouldn't be. In symposium author has a chance to correct misperceptions of discussant right away. Mindset of discussant is not, show me why this is a major contribution to the literature. Mindset is, you wouldn't have put all this work into this topic unless you thought there was something important to be said. Let's be sure we talk about what that important thing is.

4. How do you make AOM sessions exciting?

Ans: My definition of “exciting” is a session in which motivated people prepare, do their homework, make a coherent argument within their allotted time, and have something interesting to say. For me that’s “exciting”, in part because it is so rare. Here are particulars of how you make sessions exciting: 1) By people preparing for them rather than blowing them off. 2) By being engaged with the topic. 3) By having handouts so people can follow you, take notes, and follow-up. 4) By pointing out implications for teaching that people can put into use in a month when school starts. 5) By being enthusiastic about your topic. 6) By not taking yourself too seriously. 7) By staying within your time limits and organizing the presentation so that it coheres within those time constraints. 8) By having examples. 9) By knowing when you have an argument that needs to be studied closely, and keeping it out of an AoM session. 10) By reading your paper out loud before the session and smoothing out places where you stumble while speaking or where you run out of breath. 11) By telling people upfront, early why this IS an exciting session (turn the self-fulfilling prophecy to your advantage).