

# Alfred Snider, Sparking the Debate, 2013

## Chapter 6: Staging Early Events

First impressions are important, so you have to get your early events right. If they go well, people will come back and more people will come. If they disappoint, your program could fail, at least in the short term.

You want to stage events that have the potential both to draw people and also encourage them to become involved. Don't start out staging complex events such as formal debate tournaments. Most people won't come because they know nothing about the activity, and those that do may become discouraged because they don't have the training to succeed in the event. Instead, focus on simple events—your regular meetings, public speaking training, speak out events on some issue of interest, discussions, panels and simulations. These set the stage for more complex and debate-related events to come.

Hold your event at several convenient times so that more people can attend. Don't be discouraged if few people show up. Be positive, present your best work, and all will be well. Very few events are well attended the first time they are held.

After an event is over, people will remain behind to talk about their experience. Be sure to have core organizers there to answer questions, recruit the interested, and share ideas. People are attracted not just by issues, but also by a desire for open, honest and critical discussions.

### The Purpose of Early Events

Early events have more than one purpose, which is why they are so important. Your events are designed to.

- *Increase awareness of debate.* People may have very different ideas of what a “debate” is based on what they have seen in the media or in movies. Show them that debate is not some esoteric activity for the elite. Debating is for

everyone, and joining your program will be fun as well as intellectually stimulating.

- *Create interest in your program.* People will come to your events to see if they'd be interested in your program, so any event should be engaging. Look for ways to fill your event with activity and mental stimulation. Ask a variety of your members to speak, and include speakers who represent your target audience in terms of gender and ethnicity. Remember each person who attends may become a strong supporter or even a central organizer.
- *Demonstrate your activity.* You're showing your audience what you do. Whether it is a sample debate, training, or a public discussion, your event needs to highlight what it is you are offering—clear communication skills on display, a diversity of perspectives and an opportunity for people to lend their voices.
- *Increase involvement.* Asking new members to participate in early events is an easy way to increase their involvement and maintain their enthusiasm about the program.

## Introductory Events

The type of events you stage will depend on your specific goals and your resources.

### Regular Business Meetings

Inviting people to your organizational meetings will not draw those who know nothing about debate, but it will encourage those who have already expressed an interest to become involved. Involving people in the early stages of planning can increase their enthusiasm about and strengthen their ties to your project.

To ensure that you use meetings to your best advantage:

- Schedule regular meetings—Hold meetings at regular intervals and at set times. People are more likely to continue attending if the meeting becomes part of their schedule.

- Hold efficient meetings. One of the great fears people have about attending a debate meeting is that it will go on and on, with people talking too much about too little because they want to hear themselves talk. You can avoid this by:
  - setting efficiency as a goal. Make sure that all attending acknowledge efficiency as a goal.
  - setting and keeping to an agenda. Establish an agenda prior to the meeting and add any items people may have at the beginning of the session. If people ask for items to be added during the course of the meeting, delay them until the next session.
  - empowering a chairperson to move the meeting along. Your meeting does not have to follow formal rules of order. The chair should make sure everyone is heard and no one monopolizes the conversation, but he or she should decide whether the issue should be resolved immediately or delayed for further discussion.
  - maintaining focus. Keep the discussion focused on the business of the group. The chair should discourage irrelevant comments and social banter.

### **Public Speaking Training**

One of the most important introductory events you can hold is public speaking training. It provides people with skills they are often looking for, that precede participation in a debate or discussion, and that even an experienced speaker can benefit from. These training sessions should be scheduled often and should not last more than one hour. Groups should be kept small so that everyone has a chance to participate and the trainer can provide detailed feedback for each individual. If you have more than 10 people; divide the group and use multiple trainers.

### Goals

The goals of public speaking training are simple. People should be taught the basic aspects of public speaking: verbal messages (language choices, message structures, making arguments); non-verbal signals (gestures, body language, variation in rates of delivery, volume and voice tone); and audience comprehension and attention issues (making sure the audience understands the message and remains interested). Trainees should have a chance to speak (one or two minutes only), receive feedback, and speak again. (See Chapter 7) They should come away with a better understanding of the process and their strengths and weaknesses as public speakers. Since many people find public speaking stressful, keep the event low pressure and friendly, with lots of smiles and mutual encouragement.

### Process

You will need one moderately trained facilitator per speaking group (of ten or fewer). Experienced debaters can serve as trainers. The session would proceed as follows:

1. Welcome everyone and ask the facilitators to introduce themselves.
2. The facilitator explains why public speaking is important to personal and professional success.
3. The facilitator discusses the key aspects of public speaking such as voice, non-verbal communication and language choices. (You can find a sample talk online [Snider, 2012, <https://vimeo.com/44980607>], although it's a bit longer than should be used in this setting.)
4. The students are given a simple topic, prepare for two or three minutes, and then speak for two minutes.
5. The facilitator comments on each speech (some praise and some criticism).
6. If time permits, everyone speaks again, trying to improve.

Those participating should be invited to later sessions that may feature longer speaking times and eventually speaking about actual debate topics and motions. Public speaking is a skill, and thus repetition helps improve it.

### **Speak-Out Events**

A speak-out activity is an event in which the public is invited to express their opinions on an important issue. Policy makers, business persons, and government officials may also be invited, but they participate just as the citizens who are attending. Staging these events can be a valuable way to create awareness of your group, create awareness and activism about an important issue, share knowledge held by attendees, and establish the basis for future activities.

### Identifying the Subject

For your event to be a success, you need to pick an issue that will attract an audience. It should be a topic that the community is already concerned about. The issue doesn't have to be local; it could be regional, national, and international. Consult members of your club or potential participants to determine whether the issue is suitable. Phrase the title of the event by using the subject, but do so in a balanced way. It's often useful to pose the title as a question. An event titled, "Save the Forest" or "We Need Woodcutting" and not very balanced. Instead, a question might be, "How can we best utilize local forest resources?"

### Format Design

There are many different ways to design the format for such an event. Here are two as examples which in my experience have worked well:

#### **Format 1: Interested parties plus the public (60–90 minutes)**

- Welcome and orientation to the event by a moderator who will enforce time limits so that all can be heard
- Short statement by an interested party (usually invited, people with a personal stake in the issue who may represent one side or the other) 5–8 minutes
- Another short statement by an interested party
- Short statement by a member of your group to highlight issues (5 minutes)

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- Questions and answers from the audience for the speakers, with 1-minute questions and 2-minute answers maximum (25–35 minutes)
- Audience members who volunteer speak for 2-3 minutes. If you can, identify these individuals at the beginning of the event and informally ask them if they would speak)
- Summary of the issues (by a member of your group) (3 minutes)
- Summary of the issues (by another member of your group, focusing on what the previous person did not discuss) (3 minutes)
- Close of the meeting by the moderator
- Reception (perhaps with cookies, etc.) for further informal discussion of the issues

### **Format 2: Public Meeting (60–90 minutes)**

- Welcome and orientation to the event by a moderator who will enforce time limits so that all can be heard.
- Background on the issue presented by a member of your group (6–8 minutes)
- Call on members of the audience to speak for 2–3 minutes (30–40 minutes)
- Moderator requests audience to submit questions on the issue while members of the audience continue to speak
- Invite members of the audience who think they can answer important questions to come to the stage (including two from your group, one on each major aspect of the issue)
- Moderator asks chosen submitted questions to those on stage, who answer the questions (try and limit to two answers) (20 minutes)
- Summary of the issues at stake from different perspectives given by members of your group (4 minutes each)

- Close of the meeting by the moderator, announce future events to be held by your group
- Reception for further informal discussion of the issues

### **Sample Debate Events**

It is important for your group to demonstrate what a debate is so potential members as well as the community understand what you're doing. One good way to do this is to stage a sample debate.

#### Identifying and Preparing Participants

Choose your debaters with your recruiting goal in mind. Don't use highly accomplished debaters. If the demonstration is only of the best debaters, members of the audience may be reluctant to join because they may think they can't perform at the same level. Use debaters with minimal competence and have them debate a topic that has good arguments on both sides of the issue. It is essential that the audience imagine that they can do what they are watching.

Preparation of debaters should focus on sharing arguments and strategies. Both sides need to know what the other will be saying so that they can improve their arguments and evidence. You do not necessarily have to hold a practice debate. Most formal debates are largely extemporaneous, so a fully rehearsed and non-spontaneous debate would be a deceptive to the audience.

#### Topic selection

The topic for the sample debate should be of legitimate local interest. While the issue might be global, it should be something that citizens are concerned about. Ask your members what sort of topic people would like to see a debate on. It is also important to select a topic about which there is some division in your community. For example, a debate of "The factory in our town X should not be closed" might lead to a rather one-sided discussion. Feel free to consult the topic lists found at Debate Motion Central (<http://debatemotioncentral.blogspot.com/> and at

<http://debate.uvm.edu/debatemotioncentral/index.html>), compendiums of balanced topics covering thousands of controversies.

### Format Design

If you have decided on a specific debate format for your later activities, use that in the demonstration. (Existing debate formats in popular use are discussed in Appendix One.) Because this debate will be a first time experience for many in the audience, you may need to make some adjustments. Based on my experience, here are some format guidelines:

- The debate should take less than 60 minutes.
- The debate should have a very short opening and closing, each less than a minute.
- The debate should involve at least four speakers, with a mix of men and women, ages, etc.
- Speeches should be no longer than 5–7 minutes.
- The speakers should be interactive through either cross-examination or points of information.
- The audience should be invited to participate near the end of the event (either questions after the debate or before the last summary speeches).

### Staging issues

Configure the room so that there is a podium or small table in the front middle of the space, at least one table on each side, and rows of chairs facing the podium and tables. Unless it is a large space, you will not need a microphone or public address system. Have a member of your club keep time and to introduce speakers.

### Audience Involvement

Audience involvement helps recruit people. When audience members audience members become involved in some small, simple way they realize that debate is not an esoteric activity for the elite but something they can, and will enjoy doing.



You can involve your audience in several ways. Members can ask questions of the debaters or make 1 minute statements on the topic. In either case, carefully monitor time and keep comments short to avoid audience boredom. The former works better if you think the audience will be reluctant about becoming involved.

### Managing Disagreement

Make sure that your event shows that your event illustrates debate's focus on respectful disagreement. Remind your debaters to be polite to each other and avoid self-indulgent personal jibes that the audience will misinterpret. Tell your debaters to smile even while disagreeing.

### The Decision

You have three ways to end the debate: the audience or a judge(s) decides who did the better job of debating, or you have no decision. The audience can vote on the winner either by a show of hands or by leaving by different doors (used by many university debating societies, but it does mean the decision is a bit more obscure). . If you choose the different doors method, you then announce the result later through your communication network, which is another reason why they would want to be a part of it. You can use judges, although I don't recommend doing this for public debates because the judges may become the focus instead of the arguments. If you use judges, make sure they are impartial and have some debating experience. If you decide not to have a formal decision, encourage all to make their own determination which, after all, is the most important one.

### **Involvement Activities**

Involvement activities are events other than debate and recruiting sessions that you can use to attract and keep new members. These are stand-alone events with value, but they also are excellent entry events into your group. They are similar to debates (in that people speak, issues are discussed, and different opinions are welcomed),

but are not centered around disagreement, which makes some people uncomfortable. These events can attract people for the same reasons as a debate, but will appeal to different people. Three that you might want to consider using are discussions, public speaking contests, and simulations

### Discussions

Invite people involved with an issue of interest to be on a panel with members of your group. Have four to six people on the panel and encourage comments and questions from the audience.

### Public Speaking Contests

These can be very useful for if you are trying to attract school students and to find ways for your group to cooperate with schools. These do not need to be large events and may well take place inside schools, either in assemblies or in classrooms.

When you are organizing the event:

- Contact schools or other groups and to see if they are interested in cooperating.
- Develop a broad topic for speakers, such as “our city in the future,” or “what our generation must do differently.”
- Publicize the contest and allow people to sign up both in person or online.
- If you have more than five contestants, hold preliminary contests. Then stage a final event.
- Ask members of your organization to as judges (odd numbers make it easier to break ties), or invite prominent local citizens.
- Award a trophy or plaque to the winner. Cash prizes are nice but not necessary.

### Simulations

A number of activities similar to debates may be more appealing to some individuals because in these activities they are play acting and not really speaking as themselves. In these events speakers assume other roles, for example, legislators, judges, or diplomats. Simulations are of common events that occur in the real world and are thus familiar to potential participants. They often work well with school and university students. Remember, the goal is to get people to speak and make arguments about important issues, and debating is certainly not the only way to do so.

Two events you might want to try are: mock trial and Model Parliament or Model UN. A mock trial mimics the experience of a courtroom trial that most of us are familiar with, with audience members playing roles such as jurors. There are a number of sample cases available from the Seattle YMCA (<http://www.seattleyymca.org/Locations/YouthAndGovernment/Pages/MockTrial.aspx>) and the Texas High School Mock Trial Competition (<http://www.regonline.com/builder/site/tab3.aspx?EventID=1136762>) as well as advice on how to structure and hold such an event (Snider & Schnurer, 2006. 68).

A Model Parliament or United Nations simulates a session of those bodies. In these events, people take on the role of parliamentarians or representatives of some of the countries of the world to debate one or two issues. In the latter case, participants advocate the position of the nation they represent.

### **Publicity and Documentation**

Obviously, your events won't be successful unless people attend. Plan publicity well in advance and use all the methods outlined in Chapter 5. Remember that your goal is not just to have a successful event but to expand your active membership. Identify and ask interested populations to attend and invite community groups that might be interested. Contact the media to publicize your event and suggest that they cover the event as a news story. In short, use your entire communication system to publicize the event.

Your publicity efforts shouldn't end with the event. Make sure to use your entire information distribution system to spread the word about what happened.

Document your event using a small video camera or even a video camera on a mobile phone. Upload the video to your normal website and distribute links among your members through your communication channels. Also compile a written report with photos from the event and circulate it as well. Write a story for the organizational newsletter and/or blog and then send the story on with a few pictures to media outlets that might be interested. Use Twitter to send links after they are available. Post-event publicity not only builds solidarity for your group but also encourages people who did not attend to come to future events. They will learn that the event was successful and regret that they weren't there.

## **Utilizing Human Resources in Early Events**

Throughout this chapter, I've emphasized the need to use these events to recruit additional members. However, they can also be very valuable in developing the skills and abilities of those who are already in your group and may take part in these events.

Newer members of your group should be encouraged to become part of organizing and staging these events. Such involvement will give them a sense of ownership as well as a perception of themselves as capable in their participation.

### **Training and Involving New Core Members**

You cannot just take new people and tell them to organize such events as this chapter describes. Encourage new members to become involved and pair them with more experienced members to accomplish tasks. You will need to describe tasks in detail and encourage the more experienced person to welcome requests for help and advice.

Always remember that you are training new members for the long term, so:

- Rotate tasks to help core members gain expertise. Once a newer member has been successfully involved one event, ask her to take on a different role for the next. Explain that changing roles will make her a better-rounded event organizer and prepare her for major roles in the future. Indeed, after being involved in several small events, they will be ready to organize major events.
- Give praise and credit. The newer the person is, the more praise and credit you should give. As I have said as a coach, the most important people at a debate tournament are those who are attending for the first time. If it goes well they will go again, but if it does not this may well be their last experience. The same is true of new organizers and volunteers. Make sure they feel appreciated and valued and they will become more valuable in the future.

## Conclusion

Early events are the most important. They can grow your group, improve its recognition in the community as well as train newer members. It is important to remember that these may be very important steps that must be taken to reach more advanced goals. If you want, for example, to organize a successful debate tournament, these events can pave the way for that. To have a successful debating program, you need dedicated people with appropriate skills, community awareness and support. These early events can help create these necessary elements.

### Additional Materials

Arts Unit, New South Wales, Speaking Competitions,

[https://www.artsunit.nsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/Taking\\_the\\_Initiative.pdf](https://www.artsunit.nsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/Taking_the_Initiative.pdf)

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<http://debate.uvm.edu/NFL/rostrumlib/mock3ross0697.pdf>

<http://debate.uvm.edu/NFL/rostrumlib/mock5ross0597.pdf>

<http://debate.uvm.edu/NFL/rostrumlib/mock6ross0298.pdf>

<http://debate.uvm.edu/NFL/rostrumlib/mockcross0497.pdf>

<http://debate.uvm.edu/NFL/rostrumlib/mocktMarks0402.pdf>

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United Nations, Cyberschoolbus, Organizing a Model United Nations. New York: United Nations, 2001.

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