

## **Roundtable Discussion Tips by Glen Gould**

### **Before the Roundtable Discussion**

Choosing the venue and the right group of people to attend your Roundtable Discussion is critical to success. Choose your venue carefully. Your chamber meeting room or boardroom is ideal if you have one at your chamber. Otherwise, avoid restaurants, open meeting spaces, and other locations that have additional distractions (e.g. large outside windows). Your Roundtable Discussion should last for one hour maximum.

Once you've selected your venue, select the list of people you will invite by sending each one a personalized invitation to the Roundtable. The number of attendees you wish to engage will ultimately determine the type of invitation, the room size, and all other aspects of the event. If your event will be a small, intimate meeting with just a few attendees, you might handwrite each invite. Remember to emphasize the meeting is important and will only last one hour.

To have 5-7 people in the room you should invite around 20. Larger groups that will more resemble group think-tanks will require professionally printed invitations and postcards are best. Remember: Handwritten invitations get the best response at about 25-30%. Postcards printed professionally will get around 10-15% response. Of course the familiarity of your target list with you and your chamber will impact these numbers. Invitations should be sent no less than three weeks in advance but no more than six weeks in advance. Be certain to have a simple response mechanism such as an email address or phone number. And make sure to respond immediately with further details acknowledging their RSVP.

After sending the mail invitation, follow up within one week with an email reminder invitation. You can use the same wording from your handwritten invitation, or you can use a PDF version of the professionally printed invitation for larger groups. Again have a simple response mechanism. If you have a link in the email, be certain it is live. Nothing

is more frustrating than having an email link that is broken. Again, respond immediately with details to their RSVP.

Within one week of the event, call all the remaining invitees that have not responded. Even if you have a full room, they need to know you were serious about having them attend. This will ensure a timely response next time.

Two days out, send a reminder email to all the attendees. Advise them of any details they might need. Don't assume they know how to get to the chamber, or what time to arrive, or what to bring with them. Tell them every boring (to you) detail. The more information they have the better your event will be.

### **Day Of The Roundtable Discussion**

Set up the room early, preferably the night before but no less than one hour early. You'll be surprised how early people will come to your event when they feel invited. The room should be set to encourage discussion: Smaller groups around one table or in a "U" shape, larger groups can be set in tables of 6 or more. Use preprinted name place cards and preset the room to encourage people to sit with people they may not know. Provide note paper and pens, as well as refreshments appropriate for the time of day. Finally, provide a pre-printed form for evaluation and a page or two for notes they will take and share with you during and at the end.

Have flip charts or whiteboards to record ideas. Better still, use a voice recorder and/or video camera to record everything. Take no chances. The best ideas will come at the time you are least ready to record them. You should also have a designated note taker.

Be certain to have several volunteers available to answer questions and direct people, even if only a few are coming. When people arrive, give them a few moments to get situated, which means your meeting will likely start five minutes late. People will arrive at the time they believe the meeting will start. Let people know how much you

appreciate their attendance and about rest room facilities. Be sure to advise them to put their phones on vibrate. Then allow everyone to introduce themselves to the attendees. Larger crowds may require introductions at their tables only.

Facilitation is key to success. Let everyone know your goal is to get everyone to participate. Have three to five questions ready to get the conversation started. One good starter is “What challenges are you currently experiencing in (insert topic). Let the audience speak and try not to guide their answers. You might have to referee a bit too. If one member seems to be dominating the conversation, ask specific questions of other attendees. When someone agrees with the statement of another, try to prompt a drilling down of the conversation further into details. Don’t allow the conversation to drag on. Get the details and then suggest you are going to “switch gears” or “move on” to another or related topic.

End on time. Whatever you do, honor their time by ending on time. Let them know they are welcome to stay, but don’t continue the meeting. Advise the group of your plans going forward. What will you do with the notes you’ve collected? How will they know they made a difference? Provide each attendee with an evaluation form asking them for their feedback. Was this a good investment of their time? Is there one thing they will take away and use? Is there one thing they wish had been done differently? Keep the questions short and the fewer the better.

### **After the Roundtable Discussion**

Send a thank you card to each attendee. Tell them how much it meant to you and the community that they gave of their time and expertise. Then let them know the next steps. If possible, compile the information and share it with the attendees. Then let them know you’ll be asking for help in the future and you’d like to have permission to call on them again.



About the author: Glen Gould began his professional career when he was eleven working for a catering service. By the time he reached his twenty-third birthday, Glen had managed fast-service restaurants and held management positions at some of the most exclusive resorts and country clubs in the nation. There he learned the basics of customer service but it wasn't until he owned his own business that he learned first-hand how service can impact the bottom line. Today Glen Gould is an author of four books and is an engaging speaker and trainer specializing in customer service, enthusiasm, marketing, sales, and small business training. He resides in greater Atlanta, GA with his wife Tammy and their two sons, Grant and Carson.

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