Hosting a legislative policy forum or candidates forum is a great way to raise the profile of an organization and to educate members, clients and employees. It may sound like a big task, but here are some easy steps to take in setting up a successful forum.

First, think of a forum theme or topic that will interest clients, presenters, and others. A forum is an opportunity to showcase an organization. Consider a topic that educates the attendees. It should be interesting and topical to their work.

If seeking elected officials or political candidates to present, they will be glad to be told that there is a specific topic, e.g., “K-12 education policy changes in Minnesota,” rather than having to prepare for any and every issue.

Second, the presenter or presenters is critical to driving attendance. Plan ahead to line up speakers, especially if some may be hard to book. Also, send out a “save the date” invitation to build anticipation and interest in the event.

Third, decide on the format of the forum. Select a good moderator. A good moderator keeps things moving and is a key part of a successful forum. Maybe that is the chair of your committee or your board, or the executive director. Whoever it is should be careful not to talk too much – folks are there to hear the forum, not the moderator. Often, question and answer segments at the end of the forum can add value to the listeners’ experience. However, if the crowd is small or doesn’t have questions, this part of the presentation can fall flat. Think about giving a few good questions to audience members ahead of time to get things rolling.

If hosting a political candidate forum prior to an election, be aware that this is a serious undertaking. If you decide to invite the media, that may entice candidates to participate because it will get their name and message out to a much broader group of voters than merely those in attendance. Questions work best if they come throughout the program in a candidate forum – both from the moderator and the audience. If you decide to invite the media to a candidate forum, do so well in advance in order to get the event on their calendars, but be sure to place reminder calls to them the day before. It also helps if the candidates’ campaigns call the reporters and assignment editors.

Finally, when it is all over, be sure to thank those who spoke in front of the audience, and then follow up with next day with a handwritten thank-you note.