

SALON 101

14 Helpful hints for the neophyte salon-giver

By Guilt & Pleasure founding editor, Mireille Silcoff
(a salon-giver slightly anal in her attention to detail):

Guest List

The people who attend will make your salon. If you have a great mix of minds, you could have a salon atop a rubbish heap and it would still be great, but a successful mix is not something that will come quickly or easily, and forming the guest list can take up a good swath of a host's time in the first few months. There is no science to guest-listing, but some helpful hints can be provided. Most importantly, make sure you have many different kinds of people in the room. Like minds will just sit there and be in agreement all night, but if you pit lawyers and businesspeople against artists and record producers, or have pinko lefties vs. boiling right-wingers, you will have a raucous event, no doubt. That said, if your crowd is too polarized, your salon can very easily descend into idiotic bickering and tiresome grandstanding; the key is in buffering the extremists. Love the pinko lefty and the boiling right-winger? Invite them both, but just make sure there are also a few people in the center to keep them from scratching each other's eyes out.

Open House vs. Invite Only

The "open house" is the archetypal model for the salon: a location (usually someone's home) is chosen, word is spread that a salon will be taking place, and whoever comes, comes. While this seems like it might be the easiest formula for the salon host, in truth it's very hard to control an open-house event. You never know who is going to show up, how many people will arrive, or whether the crowd will jibe. My own salons have been invitation-only. Creating the initial guest list was quite difficult: it involved calling up not only friends and colleagues, but also a whole bunch of people I didn't know but thought might add to the conversation in interesting ways. After a few months, a core group evolved, they began suggesting guests, and the crowd began coming together pretty organically. Still, no matter how highly recommended a person is, try to make a point of chatting with him or her before you extend an official invitation. Ask potential guests what they hope to get out of the salon and prime them on the topic of the salon they wish to attend. After this kind of conversation, some would-be guests may decide the salon is not for them. Those who like what they hear will feel more comfortable when they arrive, because they won't feel like they are coming in "cold." Of course, after this initial conversation you may also realize that certain candidates are not right for the salon, in which case you should thank them for their time and tell them you may be in touch.

Keeping in Touch

Email is an excellent way to stay in contact with your salon members between events, alert them to upcoming salons, and keep the salon network connected. It is totally permissible not to blind-copy your salon list when sending e-mails. You should think of your salon as a small community, and the people in it should be able to communicate with one another freely. When new people join the salon, tell them that their name will be added to that month's mailing list, and that their e-mail address will be available to all other salon members. If you find that some salon members are using the e-mail list inappropriately - for example, sending out mass mailings of bad jokes—you must stop them immediately. You do not want salon members to regret joining because their e-mail inbox is being bombarded. You should also have a light touch yourself when sending out salon-related e-mails. If you send too many messages, a kind of fatigue can set in, and members may stop opening messages from you. Your address should be a "Yay!" address for salon members, an exciting addition to their inbox, so stay rare. Three group emails a month—one pre-event, one post-event, and one mid-month (there might be something members need to vote on or something you want to alert them to)—should do the trick.

Core Group and Crowd Rotation

Most salons naturally develop a core group of regulars; these are the people who have helped bring the salon into being or have become dedicated to the institution and attend events regularly. You can see your core group as a kind of board of directors; they can help you with organizing, moderating, and hosting duties. These very important people are your central structure—your guest list builds up from them—and should be automatically invited to every salon. However, if the same guests are at your salon every time, conversation can very easily become dull. Even in a tight group, it's good to have new blood coming in. It's best to invite new people in on a one-time-only basis at first. Remember: they are trying you out as much as you are trying them out. After the event, if you have found someone to be a good addition, invite him or her to the next salon and add him or her to your mailing list. If the person didn't work out well, thank him or her for attending and leave it at that. If someone maintains contact with you and seems very interested in attending another salon, extend another invitation and see how he or she does a second time around. There is always natural "drop off." There will be people who leave town, people who become too busy to fit a salon into their lives, or people who have simply lost interest. Still, after several months, you may find that the salon has created a network several times the size of the group you can reasonably accommodate. Also, it's hard to keep on infusing with new blood without draining a little at the same time. Last season at my own salon, I found that my core group had grown to a size at which there was scant room for newbies. When I launch the next season, I am going to try out a kind of "first come, first served" system. Putting aside five seats for first-timers - usually nominated by existing members, but sometimes people I've just read about or met - I will e-mail the entire existing network telling them about the topic of the next salon and letting them know how many seats are available. After the cap has been reached, latecomers who miss out will be encouraged to respond more quickly the next time. Another good idea for crowd control that allows for a constant source of new blood is to keep a very tight core or inner circle - say, of ten people - and ask them to invite one person they find interesting to each salon. This plan also takes some of the burden off the host.

Problematic People

Extracting people from a salon network is one of the most difficult things about running a salon, but sometimes it must be done, either because a person is a disagreeable presence in the salon room (there are all sorts: manic interrupters, conversation hijackers, perennial insulters, general meanies) or because a person has no presence at all (there are quiet, active listeners - wonderful in a salon group - and then there are mute lumps taking up a valuable chair). Those who provide gratis refreshments at their salons will likely also encounter the type known as the freeloader. You can't be a weenie about this kind of thing: removing someone from your e-mail list abruptly or just not returning calls is bad salon karma. You must have a clear and honest private conversation with your problematic person. After such a chat, you may decide to give the problem person a second chance. If not, at least you will know you have acted like a proper adult.

Hosting and Moderating

I have always acted as both host and moderator of my salons, which is just about the stupidest way of running things. As host, your tasks during the salon include taking care of refreshments, creating ambience, and making guests comfortable. As a moderator, your main job is keeping the conversation on track. This can be harder than it seems: you have to make sure no one is hijacking the discussion and that tangents are not usurping your central topic (although sometimes it's amusing for the crowd to sit back and watch a few brains go at it, and sometimes tangents can become more interesting than the topic originally proposed). In short, moderation requires a lot of concentration, which can be hard when you are also busy filling glasses or pointing people to the toilet. Try to decide which job suits you better. If you are a born host, select someone else from your group to be moderator, bring in a guest moderator for each salon, or let different members moderate on an alternating basis. If you want to moderate, assign hosting duties to someone you really trust, someone you think will be able to create the appropriate atmosphere. If you want to do both, be aware that you will require a good deal of recuperation time after each salon.

Regularity

Successful salons can be built on simple regularity. People lead crazy lives, and they forget things all too easily, so keep it straightforward: always have your salon on the same date (for example, the first Wednesday of every month), at the same time, and, if possible, in the same place. Some salons happen weekly, but a monthly commitment is more comfortable for most. That being said, while a month is a short enough time between salons to maintain continuity, one that convenes only every six or eight weeks can have a hard time gaining momentum: too much time elapses between events and it will be like starting from scratch for every one.

Topic Selection

You don't need to choose a topic for the first salon; the best topic for first meetings is the salon itself and its members. People can introduce themselves and talk about why they are there and what they hope to get out of the salon. It's a way to get your crowd comfortable with each other. After that, topic selection can work several ways. The host/moderator can propose a few ideas every month and have people vote via email. Topics can also be chosen by a committee created for the task. Some hosts have been known to reserve the last few minutes of every salon for discussing what topic would be best for the next gathering. Of all of the options, email voting seems to usually work best: it's fast, convenient, and has the added benefit of being in private and without the

pressure of peers. Or you can just pick up copies of the latest *Guilt & Pleasure*, and voila! you're ready to convene a Reboot Salon.

Readings

Sending out readings—a few articles, book chapters, photographs, comics, or whatever strikes you as relevant—either via email or post, is a way of getting people both primed for and excited about the upcoming salon discussion. It's beneficial to the conversation when everyone in the room has some knowledge in common. Plus, when a moderator is stumped for where to take a discussion, referring to a text can come in really handy. Your salon discussion needn't be based on the readings you send out. Sending readings out one week in advance gives people enough time to get through the stuff, but it's not so long that they'll forget what they've read. If you choose to include readings as part of your salon, you will be delighted to see how many people actually read them. The key is not to send out too much: try to limit your packages to about an hour's worth of reading, and temper super-heavy texts with lighter stuff that you know people will enjoy (if you are sending out a long academic article, pack in a relevant magazine piece, a bit of graphic fiction, or a short story, too). You never know where people will get their ideas from, so try to make the readings as varied as possible. I prefer sending the readings out by regular post - I feel people are more likely to read something if it's in their hands rather than in their e-mail inbox - but the monthly photocopying and mailing is no small job, and it can be expensive. If you choose to use snail mail for your mailings, you can ask for donations from members to cover the costs.

Location

The "classic" salon is run in someone's salon, meaning in their drawing room or living room. That's not to say that amazing salons cannot take place in other locations, such as a restaurant, a social club, a lounge or a small concert hall, the back room of a bar, or a quiet café. A good venue is an important consideration; it will define the vibe of your salon more than you might think. The venue you choose must be conducive to intimate conversation, and the best way to get there is by choosing a space that is both intimate and private. Don't go for high ceilings when you can have low ceilings. Don't go for slick and minimal when you can find nubby and comfortable. My own salon has so far taken place both within my home and outside it. I have found the home option—more intimate, more special—works better for my crowd, who are the sorts who frequent restaurants and bars and concert venues quite regularly. Opening up your home to lots of people every month is no small task, though. Just preparing the place with enough chairs and organizing refreshments and glassware and all that stuff can eat up loads of time. I quite enjoyed this preparation; the trouble for me became the size of my salon's group and the size of my living room. Squeezing people into a small space can actually be great for a salon - ideal, even - but the salon in my living room became a bit of a how-do-you-get-an-elephant-into-a-shot-glass situation. Last year, I moved the salon to the bar of an arty hotel in Toronto's west end. Because my salon was happening on Mondays then - a slow bar night - the owner roped off the room for us. It was a great setup, but the room was big and had high ceilings, and the feeling of the salon changed. Some liked it better, said it felt like a "more public" event, but some continued to ask me if there was any possibility of moving it back to my living room, which of course would have meant shrinking the group down. Now the salon takes place in a small and slightly ramshackle French restaurant in Kensington Market, which is an old Jewish quarter in Toronto. It's a public space that feels more like a living room than the hotel did, and again, because the salon happens on Mondays, the owner is willing to let us take over the place free of charge. This location has proven to be a really good compromise.

Group Size

A salon can be as small as five people sitting around having a discussion. Some salon-givers seriously agree the “golden number” is somewhere between twenty and twenty-five, which is a big enough group for all kinds of ideas to go flying around, but small enough so that everyone gets a chance to talk and back-and-forth conversations can take place. Once your salon takes in more than thirty people, guests need to start raising their hands to speak and spontaneity is lost. There will be people who leave the event without having been able to say everything they want to say, and there will be people who will not make a peep because they get intimidated in a big group. The best thing to do is to start small - say a dozen people - and see what size suits your salon best, or how big it becomes on its own. If your group grows to more than thirty people, it may not be a bad idea to separate your crowd into two groups, each with its own moderator. You can save the last hour of your salon for a huge “round table” where the two groups come together.

Time and Length

The magic time for a salon seems to be during the week - because people can go away or be busy with family or friends on weekends—at about 8 PM. This gives most guests enough time to end their workday and have a bit of dinner before arriving. I have usually designated the first hour of the salon to casual, cocktail party-style conversation. People know that 8 PM is when the doors open, and 9 PM is when the group conversation starts. How long the conversation lasts is really up to the host and moderator, but two to three hours seems about right. A fifteen-minute break midway through the night is a good idea, and having a venue where people can hang around long after the official salon conversation has ended is preferable. Sometimes the most interesting ideas can crop up within smaller groups after the round table has been cleared away.

Refreshments

Salons can take place in the daytime—say, over brunch—but I have never personally been to such a salon. I have only known nighttime, drinky salons. I don't know how kosher it is to sing the praises of alcohol, but the stuff really works if you want to get a conversation going. BYOB is totally acceptable. Food is less essential; indeed, a big meal will not help discussion (hard to talk with one's mouth full). That said, providing some food can make things a lot easier for some of your guests. Because the best time to throw a salon seems to be on a weekday evening, some guests may arrive straight from work, and some will not have had time to eat dinner. A bit of fruit, cheese and bread can tide people over. If you are throwing a home-based salon, members will often ask if they can help or bring anything. Take them up on it. If you are throwing your salon in a restaurant, café, or bar where food is served, ask the proprietor if he or she can come up with a limited choice of fixed-price, easy nibbles for your guests. You don't want guests distracted by large menus, complicated bills, or huge plates of prime rib, but you also certainly do not want a room of empty stomachs with access to wine.

Costs

A salon can cost you absolutely nothing, and very easily. The longest-running salon in Canada is called Wednesday Night—it's been going for more than 20 years—and is run by a couple who open up the dining room of their Montreal home to about thirty invited guests every week. The cost of admission to Wednesday Night is one bottle of wine. The only thing the hosts provide are peanuts (new guests are told that there is no food at the salon), and everyone always has enough to drink. Wednesday Night makes great use of e-mail to

send out news and readings. Some salon hosts like providing more for their guests - such as a bit of food or a bit of drink. If a salon is happening in a public space, such as a café or a bar, there can be a charge if the host wishes to rent the place out to ensure that his or her guests are the only people in it. Photocopying and mailing readings can be an expense, as well. To cover costs, salon-givers can ask for donations or charge a cover charge (although some believe charging goes against the spirit of a salon). Also, some universities or cultural organizations may be open to helping fund a salon. It's worth looking into.