

Networking: What Do I Say?

What do I do if I'm at an event, or even a meeting with clients, and the discussion revolves around sports¹ (or something else I know nothing about)? How do I participate in the conversation?

I'm new at attending networking events. After I introduce myself, what do I say?

I get these questions a lot from lawyers who are new to networking or from women who often find themselves at a loss for what to say or how to participate when the conversation is dominated by a group the lawyer does not belong to (for example, where the conversation is dominated by men and the lawyer is the only woman, where the conversation is dominated by golfers where the lawyer is not a golfer, etc.) To me, the best way to combat this situation is to be prepared.

Here are some tips for preparation:

Know your audience

If you'll be attending a client meeting or other event in which you are aware of the other participants or attendees, do some homework about those people and their business or industry. What topics are 'hot' within that business or industry? What concerns or problems is that client/business/industry facing at present?

¹ *Please don't take this as an assumption that all women know nothing about sports - it's just an example, and one I'm frequently asked about.

Knowing your audience well may also give you clues about what topics are likely to be discussed so that you can do a little research before the meeting, if necessary.

Ask questions

Following the old rule that people like to talk about themselves, asking questions is a good way to keep the conversation flowing. Allowing others to talk and actively listening creates the impression that you're a great conversationalist - and you don't have to say much at all. Remember to keep the focus on the other person - ask questions about them, their business, their problems and concerns. If you know these individuals personally and the situation warrants, you can ask questions about more personal topics, like recent vacations or family happenings. Around the holidays, you can always fall back on asking about holiday plans or special celebrations they may be attending this season.

Use your status as an outsider to gain entrance to the conversation

If the conversation turns to a topic you're not well-versed in, use your lack of knowledge to participate in the conversation. If you're not a golfer, try asking someone in the group (or the group as a whole) what it is about golf that they enjoy so much. Ask them how they got started in the sport. Ask how often they play, or how they manage to fit golf into their schedules, or how they use golf as a business opportunity.

Check out the local news

Current news is a good source of conversation. Do a quick review of the news

on line. If you're visiting another city, pick up a local paper and review it for the local news. What is happening in the community that might relate to the business of those you're meeting with? Talk about an interesting story in the news, whether it relates to business or not. As a general rule, particularly when speaking with people you don't know well, stay away from religion or politics.

Ask for help

If you're attending the event with others, particularly others from your firm, let them know that you don't appreciate it when the discussion revolves around sports* (or whatever other topic is a problem for you - unless it's work-related) and ask them to keep the sports talk to a minimum so that you can participate as well. If you're a new lawyer, ask someone from the firm to introduce you and suggest some topics you think would be appropriate for discussion with the prospect/client, etc.

Notice your surroundings

Sometimes your surroundings provide good fodder for conversation. If you're in an office setting, you can strike up a conversation about the location of the office, the office setup, or the decor in the office. Decor and personal touches in an office provide clues about the hobbies, interests and personality of the office's occupants that can be good conversation starters.

Change the subject

If all else fails, especially if you're in a group of people whom you've met before, if you're feeling frozen out of the conversation, try changing the subject. But make sure you're ready with a new topic to get the ball rolling. Alternatively, if you're at a large event, you may want to politely excuse yourself and find another group or individual to talk to.



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