

The Art of Conversation

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SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, I WROTE ABOUT THE difficulty that wallflowers face with networking in today's business world, and gave some tips on how to get away from the wall and into the fray of meeting new people. Unfortunately, getting away from the wall is just half the battle. Many events offer just a brief opportunity to introduce yourself and get basic information about someone. Others offer the opportunity to spend more time getting to know others in the room. Once you get yourself out there, shake a hand or two, and introduce yourself, then what?

Recently I found myself sitting between two people who knew each other, but had not seen each other in many months. It was not a business meeting, but rather a social setting. One might expect that the conversation would flow easily because these individuals knew each other and because the pressure of a business setting was gone. Unfortunately for me, caught in the middle, that did not happen.

There were several moments of painful silence. I even tried to make a joke about their lack of dialog, given the amount of time that had passed since they last saw one another. Neither rose to the occasion. I continued to struggle the remainder of the evening to engage both in conversation and ultimately had to focus on speaking with one of them, as the other drifted away.

This scenario might sound familiar to some, in that a wallflower has difficulty not just putting themselves out there, but in being able to make conversation after they have made that initial contact. What do you talk about? How do you keep the conversation flowing once you get past the "how are you today?" or "nice to meet you" stage?

Shortly after the incident I mention above, a friend posted an article to Facebook about life skills they learned as a sorority member. One of those things mentioned by the author was the art of conversation and having developed the ability to make small talk on just about any subject. Even if you were not part of a sorority or did not receive lessons in small talk, you might still aspire to be a witty raconteur, defined by Webster's dictionary as "a person who excels in telling anecdotes." No one likes uncomfortable silences.

But again, what to talk about? In my earlier article, I mentioned that we oftentimes find connections with people we meet, without realizing it, whether through our children's schooling or activities or even our own schooling, friends or family. Any of those topics

could be considered safe, so long as the person was comfortable talking about family or personal things. In some settings, you might find yourself being asked about your business—what you do, where your office is located, what type of clients you have. I recommend having some of those answers prepared ahead of time. Know what you want to say in response to some of those questions.

In the legal world, when introduced to someone new, we are often first asked what type of law we practice. For some, it is a simple and quick response, such as criminal law or family law. For others, such simple terms might not cut it. Think about how you want your practice to be identified and be prepared to chat about it. Some attorneys like to share anecdotes about a case or a particular client (no names, please) and in many settings, those types of stories help keep the conversation flowing.

If you are not comfortable talking about yourself, beyond the basics of who you are, what you do and where your office is located, you can still participate in meaningful conversation by asking questions. Depending on who you have been introduced to (or introduced yourself to), you can delve into their practice areas (or business), or if you have already established an outside connection, ask questions about their family. Remember to listen to their response and be engaged. Their response might give you the opportunity for follow-up questions as well.

Another opportunity for conversation is the news. Everyone has opinions and depending on the subject, you may spark lively conversation by bringing up a recent news story or event or even politics. If you keep updated on local or state news, you may have conversation topics at the ready, and in the legal arena, recent higher court decisions may be good topics as well, depending on the make-up of those attending.

As with any new situation, there is bound to be some awkwardness when you first wade in. Hopefully once you find common ground and really start talking to someone, the conversation will flow. As others join or leave a group, the conversation topics may change, but should continue, and the more you talk, the easier it becomes. And if all else fails, learn a joke—make sure it is funny—and when you feel the conversation lagging, you can throw it out there as a parting line. Good luck and happy conversing! 

