

The Art of Starting a Conversation

by Lillian D. Bjorseth

Almost all of us have been there. We meet a new person, we run into someone we have met once before, or we see someone we've spoken with numerous times. We want to start a meaningful conversation for myriad reasons; yet, we find ourselves asking those trite questions:

- Is this your first time here?
- Did you have trouble finding the building?
- How many people do you think will be coming tonight?

And, just for good measure, we throw in a few "hmmms" and "ahs" to make us appear even less confident.

Getting off on the right foot

Here are hints to help you feel at ease, make others comfortable, ensure you are memorable after the event and gain helpful information as well.

1. Establish your purpose for attending the event

a. To gather information? It can vary from learning more about the sponsoring organization to making an educated decision about joining to learning more about specific businesses or individuals who are likely to attend.

b. To get referrals? These can include business or job referrals or for support services necessary to run and grow your business.

c. To seek advice or support? This might range from encouragement in a job search or in your venture into entrepreneurship. Or it might be from people in other companies who are employed in the same field or the same industry.

In any case, prepare your "ask for" questions and your "listen for" answers so you sound ready and are prepared to hold stimulating conversations while simultaneously enhancing your knowledge base.

2. Prepare your verbal business card

Be ready to share with others in one or two sentences what you do ... not how you do it or who you are. These logically follow. You want to intrigue people to talk with you while informing them about what you do that will benefit them or people they know.

Keep it simple because while people are listening to you, they are also assessing your appearance and behavior, trying to remember your name and planning what they will say.

Always include your first and last name (even your friends have memory lapses!), what you do, benefits to others and active verbs, the most powerful words in the English language. In general, omit your company name (unless it is really well known), your company location, titles, business labels and go easy on adjectives and adverbs.

You'll want to tailor the above information when you are with people from your company or in the same industry. They will understand and even expect jargon.

3. Remember introduction basics

Even though you learned this in elementary school, you might need a refresher:

- a. A younger person is introduced to an older person
- b. A man is introduced to a woman
- c. A less important person is introduced to a VIP.

In other words, say the name of the person who is older, the woman and the VIP first.

You deserve to be addressed as you want to be; however, you must let people know your preference so they can start the conversation correctly. If your printed nametag says "Robert," and you prefer, "Bob," it's fine to cross through the name and print "Bob" on it. Use a felt tip pen so people can easily read it.

4. Weave newcomers into the conversation

When someone new joins you, immediately introduce him or her to everyone or allow the person an ample opportunity to do. Bring the person up-to-date by quickly reviewing what you were talking about (remember it's a new conversation for them) and then asking them for an opinion or comment.

5. Remember names

The start of any conversation is a good place for you to start remembering someone's name. Hopefully, the person knows to wear the nametag on the right side (unobstructed by lapels or scarves) so that your eye will easily travel to it as you make the initial handshake. Hopefully, the person also knows to say his/her name along with the handshake.

- a. Look at the nametag.
- b. Listen as the person gives you his/her name.
- c. Study the person's business card to help implant the name in your memory.
- d. Repeat it several times during the first few minutes of the conversation.
- e. Use it when you introduce the person to others.
- f. On another note, it is vital that you use the person's name as you make your rounds to say "good-bye" to everyone you met.

6. Ask open-ended questions

The best way to avoid those one-word answers that make you feel as if your attempts at conversation have been thwarted is to not ask "yes" and "no" questions. Or, if you start off with one, have two or three open-ended questions or statements in your pocket at all times. Those one-word answers are sure to get you perspiring if you are the kind who already doesn't like to start conversations.

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