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Help

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Snooze, You Lose; Schmooze, You Win

There's more to small talk than idle chit-chat.

Those skilled at the art of small talk use it to build rapport with others, especially top managers, and softly sell themselves as an up-and-comer.

It's a learned skill and takes practice, but attention to small details can pay big dividends in the future.

"Working the room is both physical and mental," says Dianna Booher, founder of Booher Consultants in Dallas and author of many books, including *Communicate With Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time*. "You have to want to connect. In a social situation, many people think, 'How quickly can I get out of here?' Instead, view the event as an opportunity. Stay in the line of traffic and meet people."

When talking to a VIP, ask questions that underscore Mr. Big's position, such as "What's your advice for someone just starting out in the field?" "What would you do differently if you had to start over?" or "What was the best career decision you ever made?"

Listen carefully and respond to key points with additional questions. Nod in agreement and advance the conversation by adding a new fact or an illustrative anecdote. When the ball is in your court, return it with a deft spin at a clever angle. After a few minutes, all but the most pompous of insufferable windbags will ask about you.

That's your opportunity to excel. Keep your response short and crisp. State your interests and goals. If you're studying for an M.B.A. or other advanced degree, mention it and tie it to what you hope to do for the company in the future. Remember: This is a soft sell, and you aren't giving your résumé or bucking for a promotion on the spot. You simply want to make yourself known as a serious candidate for future promotion.

Tooting your own horn is the worst thing you can do in a social situation. Booher suggests teaming up with a trusted friend and working the room in tandem. You and your friend can make a point of speaking well of each other throughout the evening. It can be something as simple as, "Did you meet my friend, Sarah Jones? She's the one who rode herd on the installation of our new PDQ system that helped boost our market share 8% this quarter. She did it all to rave reviews from our customers." Across the room, Sarah is saying good things about you to people who matter.

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You'll be circulating at a party and in most cases have only a few minutes to connect. Remember your Shakespeare: Brevity is the soul of wit.

Playing host is a good way to dive into an event. Rather than standing at the side of the room, introduce yourself to others and point them to the food and drinks. This will put them at ease and allow you to make your first contacts of the evening.

Being the first to say hello narrows the chances of being snubbed. Look for someone with open body language who's between conversations or someone who makes eye contact and returns your smile.

Introduce yourself in a way that invites a response. Booher suggests, "Hello, I'm Ty Wilson, one of the team in from San Francisco." Or, "I'm Maria Garcia. Bill Thomas is one of my customers." Adding a phrase in addition to your name gives people an indication of what you might have in common.

When greeting friends, don't say, "Hi, Joe" or "How's it going?" Make it: "Hey, Joe, how's the latest system update going?" "Good morning" is polite but perfunctory. Try: "Good morning, Susan. It looks like you and I are stuck with the same Brand X coffee." The idea is to provide an opening for additional conversation.

In general, it's a good idea to stay away from politics, religion and other sometimes touchy subjects when striking up a conversation with strangers. But Booher says there are tons of safe topics to begin a conversation, including hobbies, sports, movies, plays, books, restaurants, hometowns or even the travails of your favorite cartoon character.

If you want to turn the conversation to work, consider discussing the company's corporate culture, career goals, prior work experience or an upcoming vacation.

To solidify a connection, call the other person by name several times during the conversation, mention things you have in common and show interest in that person's opinions or experiences.

"People like and feel a kinship with others who like them, appreciate them and enjoy the same things they do and are helpful to them," Booher says. "Time and attention make the connection that lasts."

If you're visiting a new city, ask about the basics: restaurants, transportation, movie theaters. "By asking questions, people feel they're being helpful," Booher says. "This hooks the other person's ego—even a competitor at a trade show."

Don't intrude on an intense conversation. It may be private. In any case, it's usually between two people standing toe-to-toe and there's no room for a third person. If you stumble into such a discussion, excuse yourself and move on.

Avoid the obvious, because it's like announcing that you've just discovered the sky is blue. There's nothing to say and the conversation goes...thud!

Don't gossip and don't gripe. Neither puts you in a good light. To cut gossip short, Booher suggests saying something like "I didn't know that. He always speaks so highly of you."

Knowing when to engage in small talk is as important as chatting with skill. Before engaging in small talk, be alert to the other person's mood and circumstances. If the boss calls you into his office for "a little chat," can the small talk and listen.

In general, small talk is a mistake on the telephone. You can't read the other person's non-verbal cues, and you have no idea if work and other matters are piling up on the other end. It may simply be the wrong time to discuss sports. Your attempt to connect will be seen as an annoyance, and the call will be cut short, defeating your purpose.

Remember that some people don't want to engage in conversation. They see small talk as an annoyance rather than as an opportunity to establish new relationships. Don't try to change them—just move on.

Minor variations on these themes will work in a range of sectors, including companies as diverse as Microsoft , Wells Fargo , Intel and Exxon Mobil .

The smart employee scopes out the territory ahead.

"Conversation isn't simply for passing on useful information or getting a job done," Booher says. "More and more in our high-tech, impersonal workplace, people want emotional involvement and connection with others. Talking helps establish, maintain and adjust relationships to keep them in good order."

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