

'Tis the Season to Make the Most of Mingling

By Debra Fine

Despite limited budgets and an uncertain economy, the season for tasty treats, gift giving and parties is here. It may look different than in past years, but the opportunity to make connections, enjoy face-to-face interaction and improve networking opportunities is still upon us. You may be ready to get into the holiday spirit, but are your conversation skills ready, or are they rusty? Mingling among mistletoe and menorahs with clients, co-workers, and peers can be a challenge, even in the best of times. What can you talk about besides the most current project or politics? And, for whatever reason, the need to impress at holiday business events can cause more pressure than it does at typical social events. It takes a lot of energy to engage with the boss, her husband, and the entire team than it does to, say, get together with neighbors at a Fourth of July block party. But it will help reduce your anxiety if you maximize your merrymaking conversation skills. Below are six ways to turn your next holiday event into a social success.

Break your silence and the ice. It can be daunting to enter a celebration when your fear about the economy and the workplace makes you feel like you have nothing to celebrate. So take a deep breath and enter the room with confidence. If you don't feel brave, act as though you do, anyway. Survey your surroundings and find a target. Don't be afraid to introduce yourself and then break your silence by using basic questions or comments to start the dialogue with fellow partygoers. Try, "How do you know the host/hostess?" or "What do you have planned for the holiday season?" or "I love your outfit, it's so holiday chic!" After this, the conversation should be easily unwrapped.

Try to be comfortable...and show it. Nervous body language—twisting your hair, slouching shoulders, and constant hand rubbing—can make others feel uncomfortable and anxious. Be aware of your body language throughout your chat. Remember, it's supposed a fun time of year, so relax! This is a party, not an IRS audit.

Don't steal the show, but be a showstopper. Nobody likes a Grinch, so make witty jokes, tell riveting stories and be personable, but also give everyone the opportunity to speak. If someone is monopolizing a conversation, wait for a pause or until that person takes a breath, and then make a comment to steer the discussion in a new direction. Try to include all guests in the conversation by asking, "What do you think?" You'll make a great impression, be remembered in a positive way, and help keep the festivities more enjoyable for everyone.

Always be prepared (yes, like a Boy or Girl Scout). Before entering an event, take a couple of minutes and think of at least three conversation topics. Remind yourself of what you may already know about fellow attendees: their hobbies, careers, or interests. If you happen to encounter an uncomfortable silence, these conversation points will come in handy. And, if you feel a pause coming, look around for conversational inspiration. The décor or setting of a holiday event can provide dozens of talk topics.

Mingle and move on, making a graceful exit. While at a holiday gathering, you should interact with several people. Ask for a referral to remove yourself from conversation: "Do you know anyone here who might have some ideas for designing a "green" business?" If this produces a referral, then you are on your way. If not, try, "I need to catch up with colleagues in asset protection as I never get to visit with them. It was very nice meeting you." Another tactic is to include them as you move around: "I need to get some dessert, would you like to join me?"

They can decline or join you, but at least you are moving around the room and managing your mingling sessions.

Follow up with your new friends. If you meet people and exchange information, be sure to follow up on what you promised after the event. If you told them you'd send them a recipe, do it. If you discussed something important with a colleague, send an email to reiterate your conclusion. Reach out to that potential client to learn more about their service needs. You should enjoy yourself at parties and help others do the same, but remember what you're doing there and what your goals are.

Holiday open houses, office parties, and seasonal social gatherings are opportunities to meet new people and enhance current relationships. Holiday networking, particularly in this economy, is a valuable tool for success. You never know whom you could meet—a future employer, a potential board member, or a resource for angel investors—so it is essential to make every interaction worthwhile. Also, these events are great for relating with co-workers, customers and clients outside of the office which can have far-reaching benefits. Use the holiday season, and everyone's good mood, to leverage your networking abilities and you can reap the rewards every day of the year.

Debra Fine is a keynote speaker and the author of the bestselling book The Fine Art of Small Talk How to Start a Conversation, Keep It Going, Build Networking Skills—and Leave a Positive Impression (Hyperion) and The Fine Art of the Big Talk: How to Win Clients, Deliver Great Presentations, and Solve Conflicts at Work (Hyperion). More information about Debra and her presentations can be viewed at www.DebraFine.com.