Some Tips to Mastering the Art of Small Talk

Jonathan D. Klein, The Legal Intelligencer

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Whether you are a junior associate at a big firm or a smaller firm, we have all been in this exact situation: you are at a networking or related event and while the partners are off talking to what seems like anyone and everyone, you and a huddled mass of associates are talking to each other (likely about how awkward networking events are). Why is small talk so hard for associates? There is no question that making small talk with total strangers can be stressful, extremely awkward, and frustrating.

Law school does not really help improve these skills. Of course law school is a great time to learn how to think critically and hone in and practice your courtroom presence through moot court(s) and practical classes, but the emphasis is on teaching the fundamental skills necessary to be an effective lawyer. Such a skill set is valuable, no question, but law school does not teach an associate how to handle a crowd at a large event or how to bring in clients so you can work toward making partner.

So what do you do when your level of success in your chosen profession is measured by your ability to master small talk and bring in clients? Well, the key is to be approachable and engaging. Such an easy task for a young associate (or an associate at any level), right? Not so much. In today's plugged-in, hyper tech-savvy, Pokémon-riddled, digital age, people appear to be forgetting (or ignoring) fundamental skills required to effectively and appropriately engage in normal conversation with someone new.

• Embrace the approach.

Such a seemingly simple starting point may in reality turn out to be the hardest hurdle to overcome, especially if guests are already mingling with others. This is not the time to retreat to your comfortable and anti-social associate pack. Survey the room and determine if there is someone who is not already talking to someone else. (Practice tip: I like to get to events early so when other guests arrive, it appears natural to greet a newcomer and strike up a -conversation.) If everyone is already mid-conversation, do not let this stop you. It is certainly harder to enter a pre-existing conversation, but there is nothing wrong with walking up to a group and introducing yourself. Just be tactful and respectful of the others you are joining. When all else fails (and it likely will not if you make some effort), befriend a partner who can introduce you around.

• Perfect your opening line.

Good news. You have found someone to talk to. Now what? Nothing ruins the initial moments of a new conversation like fumbling over what to say. You do not want to be too formulaic or you risk sounding disingenuous, but you also do not want to be overly informal and potentially offend someone. At the same time, you want to provide enough information to explain who you are while not appearing overzealous. Sounds easy right? If only we could all be so naturally and seamlessly smooth. Practice a succinct opening that gives your name, title, and employer. Hopefully the person you are introducing yourself to will provide similar information. From there, let the conversation flow naturally to learn more about each other.

• Learn about someone.

The only way to really master client development, if it is even possible, is to connect with someone and show you actually want to get to know them. Starting out a new conversation asking the generic "What do you?" or "Where do you work?" sends a not-so-subtle signal that you are only interested in talking to people who can benefit you. Naturally, we all want to end up talking to the general counsel of a Fortune 100 company, but that is rather unlikely. Be open to learning about the person you are meeting—you never know who someone will become or who they know. Cultivate every relationship and treat each and every person you connect with as if they are equally important. You are not going to land a client after the first handshake (if you do, you can write the next article), so always make an effort.

• Engage in actual conversation.

We can all engage in pleasantries, but that does not cultivate the sort of relationship that may ultimately lead to business development. When meeting someone new, actually try to get to know them (as much as one can in a conversation at such events). Presumably, there is a lot more to a person than their job and title. Plus, discussing work and nonwork-related topics (sports, current events, literature, etc.) will hopefully help you find something in common that can sustain the conversation and make this person want to meet you again or show up to a networking event hosted by your firm when invited. (Practice tip: I try to focus on one or two topics during a conversation and ask follow-up questions and related stories if applicable to connect with someone.)

• Always make eye contact.

It may seem rather trivial—and common sense–but when you are learning about someone, be sure to make appropriate eye contact during the conversation. Scanning the room for other guests or obviously looking over or around the person you are talking to will only create a negative impression of you. You only get one chance to make a good first impression with someone new, so make it count. Indeed, this initial interaction lays the foundation for future dealings that will hopefully result in business coming your way. Making eye contact is such a basic skill, but is critical to demonstrating that you are engaged in the conversation and really listening. (Practice tip: Avoid pulling out your cellphone at all during a conversation. Doing so is an immediate turn off and makes the person you are talking to feel less important).

• Lock in the introduction.

This cannot be stressed enough and is a hard concept for associates to understand: bring your business cards with you everywhere, not just when you are going to and from work. There is nothing worse than meeting someone who could provide business and you do not have your - business cards. Naturally, there is no need to bring hundreds of cards, but five to 10 will suffice. The reason your business cards are so important is because a business relationship does not just magically occur. Sorry to tell you that you are not going to be a rainmaker overnight. You have to cultivate a relationship after the initial meeting. Before ending a conversation, hand out your business card and see if the other person has one as well. (Practice tip: Send a follow-up email to someone you met who may have client potential to remind them of your encounter).

Obviously law firms want motivated, dedicated, and hard-working associates. So often, however, associates wrongly assume their stellar work and reputation are enough to propel them to partner status. At the end of the day though, a law firm is a business. Like any business, if you show it that you can be an asset by helping to grow profits, you will go far. Only by learning how to make small talk and fostering business relationships now at the associate level can you hope to achieve that level later. •

Jonathan D. Klein is an associate at Clark Hill in Philadelphia. He represents clients on a wide range of complex commercial litigation in both federal and state courts and before institutional and ad hoc arbitral tribunals. His diverse practice includes cybersecurity and data protection, financial services litigation, compliance and internal investigations, and appellate work. Contact him at jklein@clarkhill.com or 215-640-8535.
