

Eight Tips for Social Business Conversations

by Maureen C. Costello

Traveling, dining or socializing with clients can be challenging. Here are a few tips to ease your conversations in social business situations.

1. Learn as much as you can about a meeting before you attend. Before you go to a business meeting or event (like a conference for instance), make sure you review the agenda, the purpose of the meeting and your role. Once you have the details, look for openings in the agenda when you'll have the most business social interaction. If possible, contact the meeting coordinator ahead of time for a list of attendees so you can anticipate who is attending.

2. Know your audience. Once you have the list, memorize the names of key meeting/event participants along with general information about each person if you can. For example, are they new to the company? Recently promoted? Or is there something you know about an attendee personally that you can work into conversation?

3. Develop conversation starters. Like using kindling to start a fire, pre-meditated conversational topics will launch you into an exchange with someone. Thinking of ideas in advance will give you confidence and add momentum and a higher level of interest to the discussion.

4. Topics for discussion. Good conversation starters include weather, sports, cultural events and local restaurants. More personal topics for discussion—use only if you know it's safe—include family and pets. Additional areas of interest may be hobbies, vacations and lighter business/industry updates. Avoid topics related to sex, money, religion, politics and unsettling current events.

5. Pretend you're a reporter. "Open-ended" questions are a wonderful way to initiate a conversation. Begin with who, what, when, where, why and/or how to get the conversation going. For example, "What types of hobbies do you enjoy?" "How was the national conference?"

6. Don't be afraid to work the room. Make a plan to talk with all meeting or event attendees. You may want to arrive early to allow enough time to reach all the key people on your list. To break away from a conversation, touch the forearm of the person you're talking to, look him or her in the eye with a smile, and say, "It was a pleasure speaking with you. Enjoy the rest of the [conference/meeting]."

7. Carry a small note pad and pen. Many times there's key information that you'll need to jot down so that you can follow up with a person. I suggest keeping a small note pad and pen handy. My favorite is the "shirt pocket briefcase" from www.levenger.com.

8. Follow up. One of the best ways to keep a conversation going is to follow up with a note, respond to a request from your conversation or schedule another meeting.

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