



[Click to Print](#) or Select 'Print' in your browser menu to print this document.

Page printed from: <https://www.lawjournalnewsletters.com/2018/09/01/professional-development-overcoming-business-networking-anxiety-it-just-takes-practice/>

---

## MARKETING THE LAW FIRM

SEPTEMBER 2018

# Professional Development: Overcoming Business Networking Anxiety: It Just Takes Practice

By Dr. Sharon Meit Abrahams

Coffees, breakfasts, luncheons, dinners and receptions are all part of doing business; they are also essential to *attracting* business. Being relaxed and friendly at these functions will allow you to meet individuals who could potentially become clients.

Would you prefer not to walk into a social function alone? Are you usually the first to arrive? Have you scheduled a meeting with a client and one of the firm's partners, but the partner arrives late, so you end up carrying the conversational ball for a period of time? These situations can be uncomfortable, but there are ways to overcome the discomfort. The following are a few tips that will help you feel prepared and confident in networking situations.

## Prepare for Small Talk

Anticipate the fact that you will make small talk. If you are not normally a gregarious, outgoing person, it is difficult to know what to say to strangers or people you have just met. The thought of sharing a meal at an event with a table of unknown individuals can leave a person with a loss of words. Prepare yourself for small talk by doing the following

- **Read at least the front page of one newspaper a day (in print or online)** – a local paper is always available even if you are traveling, but choose a global paper like the *Wall Street Journal* or *USA Today* which is usually available in hotel lobbies. Discussing world events (stay away from religion and politics) is a suitable conversation starter.
- **Listen to a news radio station if you do not have time to read the paper** – this is a good way to use your time wisely when you sit in traffic, on the subway or on a bus on the way to an event.
- **Read industry related newsletters or publications, (in print or online)** – if you are attending an industry function or meeting prospective clients, this is must.
- **Peruse professional journals for hot topics** – this is an excellent source of information that will demonstrate your expertise in the field or industry.
- **Subscribe to an executive summary publication or audio service** – the summaries they provide are from the latest business books, journals and magazines. You will sound as if you are

extremely well read.

- **Download podcasts** – many professional associations, radio stations and educational companies now have programs, updates and other tidbits of information that you can download.
- **Ask questions** – asking questions then actively listening to the response can endear anyone to anybody. All people like to talk about themselves, so ask open-ended dialogue encouraging questions.

If you are at a complete loss of what to say to someone, a simple technique is self-disclosure – by confessing this is your first meeting, or that you dislike the fish that was served, you open a personal conversation with an individual. Once you have engaged the person, then you can switch to small talk or business-related topics.

## Upon Arrival

When you first arrive at an event, assess the situation. Look around the room. Where is the food, the bar and the head table? Determine where people are congregating. Are they by a bar, a vendor table or just standing around? Is there an activity such as a display or entertainment that people are involved in? Gaining a sense of the room will alleviate some of your discomfort.

## Shift your Mindset

This is the time to kick in the “host” behavior your mother taught you. Hosts are in charge and they exhibit gracious manners, greet people, introduce people or start conversations. Change your mental state from being a guest to a host. Even if you are a guest at an event, take it upon yourself to notice lost individuals and direct them to the bar, point out that table 4 is in the corner, or start introductions around the table.

An effective way to move directly into host mode is to volunteer at the event. Offer to sit at the registration table, to hand out nametags or to escort important guests to the head table. By assuming the role, you exhibit confidence and helpfulness. People meeting you will have a positive first impression, which can lead to another more in-depth conversation later at that event or ones to follow.

## The Art of Mingling

The best way to start a conversation is to ask open-ended questions (those that cannot be answered with “yes” or “no”). Ask people about themselves — their jobs, their companies, their roles within the organization, their experience with the association, etc. If you spend 80% of your time asking questions (and listening to the responses) and just 20% of your time talking, people will remember you as an interested conversationalist, and seek you out in the future.

To begin, you can strike up a conversation with the event host, sponsor or door greeter. More difficult, but usually successful, is to look for someone else who is alone. Anyone standing by him or herself will welcome a conversation with you. The best for your livelihood, but maybe the most stressful, is to seek out the chairman or president of the organization hosting the event and introduce (or reintroduce) yourself.

Remember the more confident you appear, the more comfortable you will make everyone else. Smile and keep in mind that small talk is hard work for almost everyone.

## Handshakes and Kisses

In America, the handshake is the customary business greeting. A handshake signifies you are pleased to meet the person and welcome them. Your handshake says a lot about who you are and how you feel about the other person. It will either add positively or negatively to the first impression you make. A firm handshake from a man or woman denotes confidence.

Shake hands and introduce yourself to people. While it may sound rudimentary, you cannot imagine the number of people who simply sit down at a table without introducing themselves to the other people who are sitting there. Work your way around the table and shake hands before you sit down. If a new guest joins the table, stand up, offer your hand and introduce yourself.

The following handshakes send the wrong message:

- **The Vice Grip** – A tight squeeze that crunches the knuckles implies someone who might actually pull punches, if things get tough.
- **The Wet Fish** – Moist or not, grasping a hand that is weak or flimsy, leaves an impression of a pushover, an individual with no backbone.
- **The Finger Tip Shake** – Grasping only the fingers of a hand suggests the person is too timid or weak to hold the entire hand.
- **The Two Handed** – A two-handed shake can signify real warmth and affection or it can be interpreted as a power play.

Amy Vanderbilt and Emily Post, etiquette gurus in the United States, re-thought their position on business kissing. As more women have entered into business, the business kiss or hug has become more accepted. There are, however, some guidelines. The first and most important rule is that if a woman does not want to be greeted by a kiss or hug then she should stand back and extend her hand for a handshake. The second guideline, in light of sexual harassment litigation, is that a man should not initiate a business kiss or hug.

Other pointers include:

- Women should not leave any lipstick on the recipient.
- A greeting kiss should be an air kiss or a light brush of the cheek.
- A business hug is light and more of grasp of the arms
- A kiss or hug should be bestowed only on people with whom you are well acquainted.
- Women may kiss or hug men or women.
- Men may kiss or hug women and depending on culture men may kiss or hug men.

Networking is a skill, a technique and an attitude. You *can* learn how to do it, but you have to have the desire and tenacity. It just takes practice, practice and more practice.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Dr. Sharon Meit Abrahams**, a member of the Board of Editors of this newsletter, is a legal talent-development expert helping lawyers improve their performance, productivity and profitability.

---

Copyright 2020. ALM Media Properties, LLC. All rights reserved.