

## **Small talk makes a big impression: How to use casual conversation to build your career**

Janet Ellen Raasch

*Janet Ellen Raasch is a writer and ghostwriter who works closely with lawyers, law firms and other professional service providers – to help them achieve name recognition and new business through publication of articles and books for print and keyword-rich content for the Internet. She can be reached at (303) 399-5041 or [jeraasch@msn.com](mailto:jeraasch@msn.com).*

A successful law career is built upon personal relationships with many people – clients, potential clients, referral sources and colleagues.

Although these relationships are often created by necessity, they are nurtured into productive maturity by small talk – conversations that take place in the minutes before and after business is conducted, in the hallway at your place of work (or potential place of work) or while interacting at a business/industry networking event.

“As a personality type, lawyers and other professional service providers are not great at making small talk,” said Debra Fine. “If you ask them, they will bluntly reply: ‘I chose this profession to focus on important, complex skills – not to chat.’”

“Many professional service providers (and I was one of them – an engineer) are introspective dorks who are completely comfortable talking about their area of expertise in a business setting – but completely inept when it comes to making small talk in a social setting. This can be a real professional handicap,” said Fine.

Fine is a nationally recognized speaker ([www.debrafine.com](http://www.debrafine.com)) who conducts programs for Fortune 500 companies and entrepreneurs, as well as groups within the financial, legal, health care, real estate, government and engineering industries. She is author of two books: the popular *The Fine Art of Small Talk* and the recently published *The Fine Art of the Big Talk: How to Win Clients, Deliver Great Presentations and Solve Conflicts at Work* (Hyperion). She appears regularly as a guest on national television talk shows.

Fine spoke at a program held Jan. 29 at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law. The presentation was jointly sponsored by the law school as well as the University of Wyoming College of Law, Daniels College of Business (University of Denver), Graduate School of International Studies (University of Denver) and the Legal Marketing Association Rocky Mountain Chapter ([www.rockymountainlma.com](http://www.rockymountainlma.com)).

“Each conversation, no matter how casual, is one more opportunity for success,” said Fine. “Take advantage of this opportunity. Small talk is more than just chitchat. It is a valuable tool to help you climb the law firm ladder, command respect from others, widen your business and social circles, and boost your self-confidence.”

## **Take the risk and assume the burden**

“The fine art of small talk can be mastered by anyone,” said Fine. “It is not a personality trait – but a learned skill. Once you know the rules, it just takes practice.”

Fear of starting a conversation with a stranger is second only to fear of public speaking. “Although silence in a social setting might make us feel safe, it is perceived by others as impoliteness,” said Fine. “You will be a hero if you start a conversation and you will gain stature, respect and rapport if you ‘act as host’ and keep a conversation going.”

People who excel at small talk are those who focus not on themselves and their own comfort level, but on making others feel included, valued and comfortable. “All other things being equal in a business relationship,” said Fine, “clients will build relationships with service providers who make them feel comfortable.

“It is up to each and every one of us to assume the burden of conversation in order to increase the comfort level of those with whom we are speaking,” said Fine. “We do this by coming up with topics to discuss, by remembering people’s names and introducing them to others, by relieving awkward moments and by filling pregnant pauses.”

The business/industry networking event presents the greatest challenge for making small talk – for lawyers and others. “Attend each event with a purposeful agenda,” said Fine. “Thus armed, you are less likely to take the easy way out by talking only to friends or by wandering aimlessly and unproductively.

“Do research ahead of time to generate a list of likely attendees you want to meet (or get to know better) or categories of people you would like to meet (for example, those who might need the services of an environmental litigator),” said Fine. “In addition, familiarize yourself with at least three topical subjects of conversation (the election, the big game, a new movie or TV show) you can discuss in a pinch.”

At the event, find an approachable person (often someone standing alone), make eye contact, smile, extend your hand and introduce yourself. Remember the person’s name and use it repeatedly in the conversation.

“If you cannot remember the name of a person you’ve met before, do not avoid the person,” said Fine. “The person will think you are being rude. Approach, smile, extend your hand, re-introduce yourself (give ‘the gift of your name’) and apologize for not remembering theirs.”

After the introduction, start a conversation by using icebreaking questions. These should go beyond “How’s it going?” or “What’s up?” – which have become the equivalent of “hello” and usually elicit in response a dead-end “fine” or “not much.” Good questions should be open-ended (not answerable by a simple “yes” or “no”) and can include:

- Questions about the location or the occasion
- Questions about the person’s job or employer
- Questions about the sponsoring organization

Icebreaking questions can also be inspired by a pin or a nametag or a logo item that a person is wearing or carrying.

Keep the conversation going by listening for clues in your conversation partner’s answer to your icebreaking question and using this information to “dig in deeper.”

As the conversation continues, be sure to “play the conversation game” – tossing the conversation back and forth and carrying your fair share of the burden. If someone asks you a question, provide a “rich” answer that allows them the chance to dig in deeper.

### **Be an attentive listener**

When engaging in small talk, be an attentive listener by focusing attention on your conversation partner with your body, your words and your mind.

“Research shows that others form an opinion of you based on your behavior,” said Fine, “even more than what you actually say. Keep your face friendly, maintain eye contact and nod in response to your partner’s conversation. Do not look around the room.”

Express verbal attention with comments like “I see,” “How interesting,” or “That must have been a challenge,” or by asking questions that “dig in deeper” and show that you are focused and paying attention. Express mental attention by not letting your mind wander and by not responding to a cell phone or other device.

To exit a conversation gracefully, rely on the agenda you created ahead of time. Say “I promised myself that I would meet so-and-so tonight. Do you know where she is?” or “I am trying to meet people in the environmental industry. Do you know anyone?” Or simply excuse yourself with the need to freshen your drink, get something to eat, see the exhibits or say hi to a friend.

“Thank the person for the conversation, mentioning something in particular that you enjoyed discussing,” said Fine. “Then, make sure that you actually do what you said you were going to do in exiting the conversation. If you get sidetracked, you run the very real risk of insulting your former conversation partner. The relationship will not recover.”

These same skills work for a lawyer making small talk in the time before or after a business meeting or a job interview. “In these situations, look for clues in the physical environment that can provide the basis for icebreaking questions,” said Fine. These can include diplomas, awards, objects of art (including children’s art), sports gear, photos, and books, newspapers and magazines.

“Each and every casual conversation is an opportunity for success,” said Fine. “By knowing and practicing these skills, anyone can use the art of small talk to create and nurture relationships – and achieve professional success.”