



Working the room during the holiday season

When we think about public speaking we typically visualise seated strangers at a crowded conference, or a meeting room at the office. When we contemplate formal networking what comes to mind is pressing a card into someone's hand at a work-related event and hoping to win some new business. Public speaking and networking skills can however extend to our social lives too. Christmas parties are an excellent place to exercise your communication and presentation skills. So this holiday season, have fun and relax. Enjoy the mince pies and mulled wine, but remember that every get-together you attend is a chance to flex those public speaking muscles! Here are five activities you can try at the next party, which will get you in shape for work-related communication.

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1. Approaching strangers

If the party is in full swing when you arrive, try not to feel intimidated. Everyone appears to be chatting and it can be difficult to know where to start. When advising clients on networking strategies I tell them to look for people on their own, or those in a group of three or five. Uneven numbers are good. Typically, when you approach the group, someone will notice and will include you. At this point, once introductions are made, the group can split into pairs and everyone will be engaged in conversation. If you approached a singleton, they'll probably be very happy you said hello.

Of course, you might be concerned about how to extricate yourself when you want to move on. The best way to do this is to use the excuse of needing to refill your drink or pop to the bathroom. Be sure to smile and make eye contact with everyone in the group as you say farewell.

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2. Overcome fear of speaking to groups

Some people get freaked out at the thought of speaking at a conference or large meeting. For others, speaking to a small group of five or six can be just as scary. Basic public speaking confidence can work wonders during these situations. At the root of most people's fear of public speaking is the prospect of disapproval. What if my words dry up? What if people don't like what I say? What if they don't like my appearance? They'll reject me, or look down on me! This is where solid confidence and a sense of self can come to the rescue. Before the event, give yourself a moment. Be compassionate and positive with yourself. Patiently acknowledge all of your fears and doubts, rather than brushing them under the carpet. This is known as self-soothing and helps decrease anxiety. Also, make sure you know your value. Be aware of your own strengths and let go of your need to be perfect. These actions will help you navigate any social anxiety and tricky group situations at each and every party you attend.

3. Go with the flow of the conversation

Some of the most engaging conversationalists are those who stay in the moment. They are great listeners and are happy to speak spontaneously without a pre-set agenda. The opposite of these are the autobiographical speakers: the ones that hijack every conversation and use it as an opportunity to speak about themselves in a lengthy monologue. When I work with clients to help them get better at thinking on their feet, one of the games we play is the 'Yes and...' game. This is a favourite from the world of improv comedy. The rule is that you say 'yes' to whatever your partner says and then add to it. This keeps the conversation flowing like a pleasant tennis rally. You don't have to agree to everything everyone else says, but take their comment and work with it. Add your own spin or ask them to expand on their statement. You won't have to work too hard, and you'll be seen as an engaging, generous conversationalist.

4. Tell stories

There will doubtless be times when it's useful to share a story. If you're not the storytelling type, then why not create a story file? Take some time to think of five or ten stories that are entertaining or have a useful message for your listeners. Use the CAR framework to help you break the story into components:

First, briefly share the Context – the who, why, when and where that will help you set the scene. Include any obstacles or what was at stake.

Then comes the Action. What happened?

Finally comes the Result. What did you learn or conclude from the episode? Make sure that whatever you share is of interest to your listeners. Keep it short. Add value by making people laugh or including something fascinating or relevant.

5. Be a dynamic communicator

You might not need this tip. The alcohol may well be flowing in which case you'll probably be more dynamic than usual, but I like to remind clients that it's important to be energetic when speaking to groups. No one enjoys a damp squib - especially at a party. So make sure you bring the energy and contribute to a convivial atmosphere. Some of the ways to do this are as simple as making stronger eye contact while you're speaking. You can also vary your pitch and volume more than usual. The latter will be needed because you'll probably be in a noisy place, and by playing with your pitch you will automatically sound more interesting. Being a Dynamic communicator is one of the pillars of the D.I.V.A speaking system, which says that a well-rounded speaker is Dynamic, Inspiring, Valuable and Authentic.

If you're looking for a chance to improve your public speaking and communication skills, the next Christmas party is a great place to get started. If you're not the party type and usually dread social get-togethers, then see it as an opportunity to get into shape for an upcoming meeting, interview or conference. Enjoy the party!

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