



[lillianspeaks@duoforce.com](mailto:lillianspeaks@duoforce.com)

## **Join Conversations Politely, Part II**

**by Lillian D. Bjorseth**

Part I covered how to know physically when and how to join a conversation. This article examines an equally important element: what to talk about as you join others to ensure a more pleasant experience and more business success.

### **Gender differences**

Gender differences in communication present a major stumbling block to getting conversations off the ground. Men, you have a few preferred topics in your small talk repertoire: sports, current events, business/jobs.

Women, you are comfortable with an endless array of topics – hundreds it seems – and many of them involve family and home. Add to this that you are more comfortable disclosing personal information (marital and parenting status) while men seldom discuss these topics with strangers or “in public,” and you have another stumbling block.

To facilitate more meaningful conversations that start and flow easily, it is necessary to have more give and take from both sexes. Men, you need to be more accepting of women’s desires *to relate* through communication and their comfort level with talking about personal issues. Relax and talk about the importance of healthy eating and regular workouts, the books you recently read and your pick for the upcoming Oscars or Emmys.

Women, you need to respect men’s desires *to inform* through the communication process and not to discuss personal issues at length, if at all. It would behoove you to bone up on sports and current events. Turn on the radio on your way to a networking event or read the newspaper in your limo’s backseat or while you are waiting in the airport or on the plane ... or use your phone to keep up with breaking news.



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Your first words set the foundation for the rest of the encounter, particularly when you are starting a conversation with another person. When you join a group already engaged in conversation, assess if you want to comment on the already established topic (generally safest) or start a new one.

It's usually safe to start a new conversation with [small talk](#), which is a misnomer since it encompasses the most crucial words you speak. Come with prepared icebreakers or go with the flow of the event. If you go the popular "question-and-answer" route, make sure they are open-ended. Avoid:

- "Is this your first time here?" (Yes, no)
- "Did you have trouble finding the place?" (Yes, no)

Rather, try to quickly get into meaningful questions like:

- "What's the greatest benefit you get from belonging to this group?"
- "Why did you decide to attend this (function, meeting, conference)?"

You can also tie your opening remarks to current or breaking news items or annual events such as the Emmys/Oscars/World Series/Super Bowl/the Olympics. Another successful tie-in is to ask questions/make comments about the organization/people hosting the event.

Eventually, the "What do you do?" question will arise. That's when you want to have your finely tuned [Verbal Business Card](#) ready to go. It's your launch pad to sharing what you do ... with the other person's permission. When appropriate in the conversation, return the favor and ask the other person/people the same question.



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**Stay away from ...**

Although you already know it, you may not always do it! Stay away from politics, religious beliefs or the lack thereof, sex or sexual preferences. Also hold back from giving your opinions if they differ drastically from the popular viewpoint. It's fine to have them; it's advisable to know when to share them. Do you want to deal with a possible backlash? Is it helpful for your business? Is it wise to share them with the people in *this* group?

The only person you can control is yourself. Use good judgment so you are viewed as a positive addition when you join a conversation.

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**Lillian Bjorseth helps you build a new kind of wealth – social capital – by improving your face-to-face networking and communication skills. She's an acclaimed speaker, trainer, coach and prolific author and certified DiSC trainer.**

[lillianspeaks@duoforce.com](mailto:lillianspeaks@duoforce.com); [www.duoforce.com](http://www.duoforce.com), [www.lilliancommunicates.com](http://www.lilliancommunicates.com);  
[www.greaterchicagonetworking.com](http://www.greaterchicagonetworking.com)