

Work the crowd

Social gatherings, office parties, community events—they all give you an opportunity to enhance your professional image.

But if you're nervous about what to talk about in a crowd of strangers, Toastmasters International offers this advice to turn small talk into smart talk:

- Plan your topics. Think of 2 to 3 topics you can discuss with anyone.
- Keep it lighthearted. Avoid office gossip and controversial topics. Stay clear of topics related to sex, religion, and politics.
- Meet someone new. Take the first step to introduce yourself to the CEO. Or talk to someone new while waiting in the food line.
- Spark a conversation. Ask open-ended questions about the person you're getting to know.
- Listen attentively. Ask follow-up questions about the person or group you're talking with. Listen more than you talk.
- Introduce others. Be sure to introduce a newcomer to those you're talking with.
- Consider cultural differences. Take into account figures of speech, how you present humor, and personal space.
- Limit alcohol. Know your drink limit. If necessary, avoid alcohol altogether to keep your composure.