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Entrepreneurs

How To Say 'Hi'

Melanie Lindner, 05.21.09, 7:00 PM ET

Bob Goodyear is a born wallflower. An Atlanta-based technical product manager for Symantec, a software-security firm, Goodyear often has to speak to large groups of colleagues and clients about new products. While the podium gives him strength, he clams up at cocktail parties and business functions, parking in a corner far from the action, sipping his drink and silently taking in the room.

"I was always fine making a presentation in front of a crowd, but when I tried to mingle afterward, it felt like someone was sticking their hand down into my stomach and tying it in a knot," says Goodyear, 53.

Last September, on a business trip to Australia, Goodyear decided to get over his fear of making the first move. "I knew there would be a social function after my speech, and I was nervous about mingling in a room full of people I'd never met," says Goodyear.

Rather than panicking, Goodyear got busy preparing. "I researched all the companies that would be represented at this event so that when I saw the company names on the guest's name tags, I had a piece of information about their firm to use as a conversation starter," he says.

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Goodyear's other new trick: managing his emotions by putting a time limit on how long he feels he has to mingle. "I tell myself, 'Bob, there's nothing you can't do for 30 minutes.' "

Most people have some level of social anxiety, especially when it comes to meeting new people. Fear of embarrassment and rejection snuffs the thrilling urge to meet a new business partner, sales prospect or friend. For some, making the first move can bring on everything from tense muscles to a slamming heart.

Unpleasant as all of that sounds, this is no time to be shy. With unemployment roaring toward 10% and capital hard to come by, being able to network with confidence and aplomb is critical.

For people who suffer from social anxiety, Goodyear's baby-step approach works wonders, says Mark Goulston, a Santa Monica, Calif.-based psychologist. Goulston himself battled debilitating shyness, until his first child came along. "I wanted to be someone my daughter would grow to look up to, and I didn't feel at that moment that she would," he recalls.

At the next party he and his wife attended, Goulston set a goal for himself: "to meet three new people and have them be glad to have met me." Twenty-six years later, Goulston, 61, writes and lectures about overcoming anxiety and guides patients through the process.

Oddly enough, some people are great at working a crowd while wearing their professional hat, but freeze up at social functions. Others can up the wattage at social events, but struggle to channel their inner buoyancy to snare new clients.

How to ease your fear of saying "Hi"? "Be in the moment," says Jennifer Kahnweiler, a Dunwoody, Ga.-based counselor and organizational development specialist. "Focus on bringing your consciousness to where your feet are planted. If you take the focus off of what you look like and how you sound to others, chances are you'll start to let go of your anxiety and allow yourself to enjoy the moment."

Dr. Goulston has another strategy he calls the "FTD delivery." Hook strangers by asking how they *feel*, what they *think* or what they have *done* or would *do* about a given topic. Focusing on them is a form of generosity--not off-putting aggression.

Making the conversation about the other person has another benefit: It takes the focus off of you. "When a person is focusing on themselves--wondering if they are blushing, sweating or trembling--their anxiety level increases," says Andrew Gottlieb, a clinical psychologist based in Palo Alto, Calif.

Yet another trick is the self-induced head-fake. Before approaching someone, look for physical characteristics that remind you of a close friend or relative, suggests Dr. David Barlow, founder and director emeritus of the Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders at Boston University. Maybe the person's hair is like your mother's, maybe he smiles like your best friend. Focus on the similarities, and you can convince yourself, if only for the moment, that you are comfortable with a complete stranger.

Rehearsing ice breakers with a friend before going to a meeting or party also helps. For instance, Carol Kaplan, director of public relations for the American Bankers Association, used to practice on the clerk in her local pharmacy. "Even after 20 years as a broadcast journalist and several more in public relations, I'm still not a natural schmoozer," says Kaplan. "But if I know I'm going to be in a situation where I need to be extroverted, I practice making small talk with people in the grocery check out line or the store clerk."

Ultimately, saying "Hi" is all about believing that you have something worth sharing with the other person, says John Baldoni, a corporate communications consultant in Ann Arbor, Mich. "You can't be afraid of sounding incompetent," he says. "You have to believe that you deserve to have the interaction, that your company depends on you and that you have something to offer the other person in the exchange."

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