

THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT



Goodbye, selling. Hello, connecting!

You're at a cocktail party, standing at the cheese platter. A guy approaches you, and by way of introducing himself, shouts "Harvard Business School, class of '2005! MBA from Vanderbilt! Corner office and company car at age 33!"

Would you want to talk to this guy? Uh, probably not. Yet this is generally how most presentations, ads, and job interviews proceed: Somebody shouts their selling points. Telling, rather than asking. Selling, rather than connecting.

Today, life is one big cocktail party. Your success depends on your ability to become a brilliant conversationalist. It's not enough to merely get noticed: We have to go further, engaging people to connect with us. That's the key to meeting them, befriending them, teaching them, persuading them, leading them, and inspiring them.

Soliloquies don't earn attention. Conversations do.

The smartest people and companies don't just talk to us: They inspire and advocate and challenge and move us. They get under our skin and into our conversations. They're unafraid to ask questions—and along the way, to change the way we think. They earn our business, as well as our trust and our word-of-mouth. This shift from selling to connecting is emerging as an Achilles heel for many authority figures: A conversation is shared power. But monologues don't work. The most popular brands understand that first and foremost, their role is to connect. In order to do so, they must attract and engage people into a conversation.

People now resent being told what to buy, read, and think, which is why old-school media are so rapidly losing currency. Newspapers, encyclopedias, network TV stations, politicians, and Fortune 500 companies are slowly coming to terms with the unpleasant reality that they must stop asking, "What do we want to say?" but rather, "What do our customers want to hear?"

So how can you start conversations, whether you're a person or a brand? Five key points:

- 1) Ask questions. Seems obvious, but alas, listening is all too rare. Job applicants, for instance, almost always spend more time thinking through their talking points than asking smart questions. Yet it's your questions, rather than your recitation of your resumé, that will impress an interviewer.
- 2) Understand your audience's true motivations. Artfully steer the discussion to your audience's true concerns. For instance, if you're a brand manager, in order to show a consumer how your product fits into her life, you need to know what keeps her awake at night.
- 3) Smile. Make it as easy as possible for others to talk to you. A friendly approach can overcome their self-consciousness or indifference. Whether your smile is literal or metaphorical, you have to make people want to interact with you.
- 4) Let go of (some) control. Sometimes, the hardest part of engaging in a conversation is letting down your guard. Be prepared to reveal aspects of your true personality.
- 5) Google the crap out of anyone you need to connect with. Chemistry comes from finding points of connection: The more you know about someone, the more likely you are to find those points. I'm not suggesting you get all stalker on them. But knowing where someone went to school, what their interests are, and how they convey themselves online—it can't hurt.

Now you're ready for the cocktail party of life. Just remember your breath mints.