



## **BREAKING THE ICE**

**Ellen Freedman, CLM  
© 2007 Freedman Consulting, Inc.**

---

Several years ago I started an article by revealing something about myself which most members of the legal community did not know; I am a telecommuter who works from a home-based office. That fact shocked a lot of people who assumed that I worked for PBA from their headquarters in Harrisburg. As a result of that revelation I have since helped countless attorneys focus on how to successfully set up what is called a SOHO (solo or home office) practice.

What I am about to reveal about myself in this article will be so shocking that it will make my prior revelation pale by comparison. It will be most shocking to those who know me, and especially to those who believe they know me well. Ready?

I am a shy person. See, I knew you'd be shocked! Yes, it's true. I am hopelessly and sometimes painfully shy. I am virtually incapable of small talk, sometimes even with the closest of my friends and family. And the harder I try to think of what small talk to make, the more I freeze up, and the more blank my mind gets.

Many of you are scratching your heads in disbelief right about now. "How can this be?" you are thinking. "I have enjoyed her seminars. I have had highly animated conversations with her. No way she can be shy!" I know, believe me I know. I have spent many years working hard to overcome this shortcoming which has plagued me since I was a young child. And I want to reveal now, for all of you out there who suffer from the same limitations, what I do to try to overcome them.

First let me say what I haven't done. I have not "cured" my shyness. I have not mastered the art of small talk. I still have not gotten beyond being highly envious of those people who circulate a crowded room at a business or social event and have seemingly effortless conversation and laughter with all those they go out of their way to greet.

What I *have* done is compensate for my shortcomings as best I am capable. The first step comes in controlling the environment as much as possible. That means trying to put yourself in situations where you feel the most comfortable.

For example, when I am presenting a seminar I am in control of the environment. I am presenting information I know well, and am comfortable sharing. In fact, I think that one of the reasons why I like providing seminars so much is that it enables me to totally get beyond my shyness. Conversation afterwards is usually a continuation of the presentation, but on a more direct one-on-one basis. Again, I am not making small talk, but rather speaking about topics I have mastered. That keeps me comfortable and at ease. I come across as chatty, animated, and often entertaining. No one suspects that I am disablingly shy.

Those who are observant, however, may have noticed a sharp change when a reception follows one of my presentations. When the conversation becomes about “other things”, e.g. small talk, I just fade into the background. I wander around aimlessly, virtually incapable of having conversation unless someone asks me a direct question. I smile, gravitate in and out of groups of people, but rarely contribute a word. I am uncomfortable in the extreme, and work hard to hide it behind a warm smile.

My extensive writing is yet another manner of controlling my environment. I can express myself and communicate with countless people without having to actually have any awkward personal interaction. It’s highly cathartic on my part. When I get feedback it is usually via email and easy to respond to. I come across as outgoing and animated in my articles, or so I have been told.

Two events transpired recently which have prompted me to share this information. The first event involved a luncheon invitation from the partner of a large Philadelphia-based firm. He is a fan of my columns and just wanted to get to know me and thank me for my many written contributions over the years. I was both delighted and filled with dread. How was I going to keep up my end of the conversation for an hour or more without disappointing? The closer the date came, the greater the dread.

I was able to pick the location, so I picked a nice place which I have been to countless times over the years, so I felt like I was on my “home base.” As it turned out, I was fortunate that the partner, who is the client development director for his firm, is naturally friendly and out-going. From the initial handshake to the end of our leisurely lunch, he asked me interesting questions, and readily volunteered



information about himself, which kept the conversation flowing. I didn't have time to think about being shy. All I had to do was respond and listen. That made it easy on my part.

Of course afterwards I kind of kicked myself because there were all kinds of things I wanted to know about him, and didn't ask. But at the time my mind was incapable of formulating the questions.

The second instance involved the recent inaugural Managing Partner Development Institute *What You Didn't Learn in Law School™ Conference*. ([www.managingpartnerinstitute.org](http://www.managingpartnerinstitute.org)). I watched as my partners took advantage of every break to have animated conversations with registrants, one by one. Each of my partners later shared with me tidbits they had learned about each registrant's unique situation and challenges. I remember answering lots of questions posed of me. But I was not able to have the types of conversations my partners had initiated, even with those registrants who were private clients of mine. The environment was so totally out of my control, and there were so many people, I was rendered virtually mute except for the time I was presenting. In short, I missed an amazing opportunity to forge a deeper level of connection between myself and clients and prospects, all because of my extreme shyness.

And so, as a result of these two recent events, I have decided it's time to go beyond faking it and attempt to find ways to develop the coping skills I need. Because now that I have put my virtually disabling handicap out there for all of you to see, I will just *have* to do something about it. There's no escape now. I can't fool you if you know that the smile on my face is really a mask hiding my extreme discomfort. I have to deal with it now. I've enabled you all to call my bluff.

Are you someone who suffers from the same disability to some degree? I know there are a lot more of you out there than let on. That's because there's this huge myth that people really are comfortable for the most part meeting strangers and sharing conversation. Well, some people are naturally that outgoing and comfortable. The rest of us have to either work hard to develop the skills and associated comfort, or learn to fake it well.

I'm tired of faking it. And to be honest, I'm not sure I've done such a good job of it over the years. I have been especially poor at it in purely social situations. But I firmly believe people can learn anything they set their mind to. And that by regularly practicing what you learn, it can become second nature.



I liken it to the experience of learning to drive a car. At first it feels totally awkward and requires concentration and continual thought to get it done right. You have to think about the gears, about accelerating and braking, about turn signals, turning the wheel, and so forth. You may have had sweaty palms on the wheel like I did for the first 6 months or so of driving. But think about the process now. You may remember getting in the car and starting it. But usually the next thing is you arrive at your destination, and you can't even remember anything in between. Did you stop at red lights? Use your turn signal? Stay in the correct lane?

So where do I (we?) start? Well, I turned to the internet. Always my first move. I did a number of key word searches until I hit pay dirt. It comes in the form of a little book called "HELLO my name is Scott." [Front Porch Productions at [www.hellomynameisscott.com](http://www.hellomynameisscott.com).] The author, Scott Ginsberg, is touted as the foremost field expert on nametags. He has apparently worn a nametag all day, every day, since November 2, 2000 to encourage people to be friendlier and more approachable.

The premise of the book, based on the introduction by Scott, is that you typically have no more than four minutes of opening conversation in which to decide whether or not the conversation will continue. Therefore, asking the right questions is the only way to make progress. And let's face it, asking good questions is what the art of small talk is all about.

Of course, Scott probably hasn't spent too much time in legal circles. Heck, from his picture he looks like he's about 20 years old, so I'm not sure he's spent much time in *any* circles. But for sure, those of us in the legal industry know that four minutes is way too optimistic an estimate of the amount of time someone will give you to demonstrate you can successfully and meaningfully engage them in conversation.

The book provides you with ready-made questions, broken out into categories. All of the questions are open-ended, meaning that they will elicit more than a simple yes or no answer. They will all reveal something of the person who is asked. I believe that by arming myself with these questions, I will be more in control of my immediate environment even if on unfamiliar territory. Small talk may no longer be a source of extreme discomfort with a well-rehearsed script at my fingertips.



The questions are divided into 4 sections: 1) Getting to Know You; 2) What's Your Favorite; 3) Back in the Day; and 4) If you Could . . .As an example of Getting to Know You, one of the questions is "What book has had the biggest impact on you?" From If You Could comes one I particularly like, "If you could have dinner with any three people, whom would you choose?" I found a list of 55 pretty interesting questions on the site. I'm sure there are more in the book. So I'm going to start with these, and then the ones in the book, since they're usable in most social situations. Once I build some level of confidence with these, I'll focus on creating more which are specific to our legal industry and a business setting.

Of course, whether starting a conversation in a crowded room or intimate social setting, it's also sometimes important to know how to end it gracefully. That's the flip side of the shyness coin. How long is too long? Am I entertaining or boring the person with whom I'm conversing? For that I'll have to stick by the creed of comedians – always leave them wanting more.

So how do you extricate yourself from the conversation? Well, there's the old standby excuse to go powder your nose. But that can only be used so often in smaller settings without people surreptitiously handing you the name of their urologist.

Going for a replacement drink works, but not if you have to gulp down what's in your glass first in order to do it. While we're talking about drinking, let me say that I have learned that drinking alcohol helps to ease the pain of shyness, but it doesn't make it go away. You just care about it less. On the other hand, with the mind and senses dulled by alcohol, your ability to control the environment and engage in small talk is hampered even further. So stick to mostly non-alcoholic beverages in these uncomfortable situations.

I attended a seminar given by an executive coach a number of years ago. Her instructions on how to disengage stuck with me, and have worked well. You look the person in the eye, shake their hand if appropriate, and say, "It's been a pleasure speaking with you. I'll look forward to another conversation later." And then you turn and walk away. No excuses. Just a nice end to the current conversation. I have rehearsed it, refined it, and used it many times, and it works well.

Are you a natural conversationalist? Share the wealth and help me and your peers out. Email me at [lawpractice@pabar.org](mailto:lawpractice@pabar.org) with one or two of your favorite "small talk" ice-breaking questions. I will share them with all of you out there like



me who are uncomfortably shy engaging in casual conversation, through my blog at [www.PA-LawPracticeManagement.com](http://www.PA-LawPracticeManagement.com). Oh, and when you see me at the next bar function, do me a favor and ask me a question or two about something other than the seminar, so we can have a “real” conversation where I can practice my small talk conversational skills. And that goes for your fellow attorneys who may have unjustly developed a reputation for being somewhat standoffish, when in fact they are really just painfully shy like me.

*A version of this article originally appeared in the July 2, 2007  
issue of The Pennsylvania Lawyer*

©2007 Freedman Consulting, Inc. The information in this article is protected by U.S. copyright. Visitors may print and download one copy of this article solely for personal and noncommercial use, provided that all hard copies contain all copyright and other applicable notices contained in the article. You may not modify, distribute, copy, broadcast, transmit, publish, transfer or otherwise use any article or material obtained from this site in any other manner except with written permission of the author. The article is for informational use only, and does not constitute legal advice or endorsement of any particular product or vendor.

