



# Work the (Party) Room

IF YOU'RE GOING TO THE COMPANY HOLIDAY FESTIVITIES ONLY FOR THE FOOD AND DRINK, YOU'RE SQUANDERING A UNIQUE NETWORKING OPPORTUNITY. *by Daniel Bortz*

**WOULDN'T IT** be nice to have a friend at the top of the corporate ladder? Mark your calendar for the office holiday party, your annual chance at cocktail chatter with company brass. "Take advantage of being in the same room as your CEO or division director," says Miriam Salpeter, co-author of *100 Conversations for Career Success*. Making nice with key executives can help you gain visibility you can leverage later for new projects or even promotions. Use these tricks to make no-stress small talk with the big shots.

## STUDY YOUR PREY

Make a list of three execs you'd like to meet, focusing on those with influence to help you ascend. Research each one's background online. "Look for commonalities you can use as conversation starters," says Salpeter. (Maybe you both attended a

Big East college, for example.) Ply co-workers for more information. (Does the veep follow basketball?)

## MAKE A CALCULATED APPROACH

The best way in: Ask your supervisor for an introduction. This establishes instant credibility, says Hallie Crawford, a career coach in Atlanta. Boss not game? Approaching the target one-on-one is ideal but may not be possible. To join a group conversation, "simply ask if you can increase the size of the circle," says Terri Griffith, a management professor at Santa Clara University. Introduce yourself by making what Diane Windingland, author of *Small Talk: Big Results*, calls a "role pitch": Sum up in a sentence what you've done for the company of late. So rather than "I'm a sales director," add on "I developed the campaign for our new product line."

## STEER THE CONVERSATION

Remember, this isn't a meeting, but a party. "It's about building relation-

ships, not about making transactions," says Ivan Misner, chairman of business networking organization BNI. So quickly shift away from shop talk; personal conversation makes for a more memorable connection. Use your research to formulate an open-ended question like, "Do you think Marquette has a shot this year against Georgetown?"

## EXIT GRACEFULLY

Keep the conversation brief so you don't monopolize the person's time. Debra Fine, author of *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, recommends signaling that the chat is almost over. For example, "I must get another of these canapés, but before I do, I'd love to know which NCAA player you think is the one to watch this year." In January—when everyone's back to business—follow up with an email recapping the meeting and offering a big idea or help on future projects. Says Windingland: "Never miss a chance to solidify a relationship with a decision-maker." **M**



### TABLET BONUS

People confess their company holiday party feats and flubs.