



**Pondering the Question:  
“What do you do?”**

by Christine W. Zust, M.A.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven.

Seven seconds. That’s the amount of time you have to make a positive first impression. People will size you up that quickly, observing your verbal and non-verbal language. Most professionals know this, yet, when meeting people in business or social situations for the first time, most individuals ask the same old question: “What do you do?”

I propose a dramatic change in this approach, which can deliver far greater results.

First, let’s examine the question, “What do you do?” Notice the emphasis is placed on the words **what** and **do**, not on who. In other words, you are showing the other person that you are most interested in their job title and status. The most likely response to this question is, “I’m a (title) at (company name).” The question is very limiting and it can even come across as somewhat condescending, depending on how the question is asked. Once the other person has answered your question, what next? It’s time for another question, and before you know it, you’re asking a barrage of questions, like an inquisitor. Not very friendly. Consider what the other person feels when you ask “What do you do?” More importantly, think about how asking this question positions you. It could position you as someone who is only concerned with spending your time talking to the “right” people. Is that the image you really wish to convey?

Now let’s consider replacing the question with the statement: “Tell me about yourself.” This statement puts the emphasis on the person, not on their job title or status. And isn’t this the kind of information you’re looking for anyway? Ask the most successful sales and marketing professionals how they build effective relationships, and they’ll tell you that it comes from gathering the personal information which allows them to really understand people. We have all been involved in group conversations where one person will ask about the other person’s spouse (by name) or children (by name) or alma mater (by name). It’s an effective technique. The barriers of communication begin to disappear when people believe that you are genuinely interested in them. The statement, “Tell me about yourself” encourages a broader discussion that extends far beyond what that person does for a living. When you engage in deeper levels of conversation, you mine a continuous source of precious information. It’s as valuable as striking gold.

Often times when people are engaged in a networking opportunity, they put themselves first. They want to give you their card and tell you about how important they are. By using the “tell me about yourself” approach, you put the other person first. This positions you as someone who is interested in developing a long-term relationship, not someone who is trying to shake as many hands and collect as many business cards as possible.

So now it’s time to ask yourself a question: “How do I want to position myself with other people?” A small change in your approach to others can dramatically enhance their positive impressions of you.

Try this approach with the next 10 people you meet. I think you’ll find that they will begin to perceive you in a different and more positive light.

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