

# Breaking Into a Conversation Gracefully

by Jodi Glickman

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Last week, I wrote a post about exiting a conversation gracefully that generated some buzz. Beyond commenting on the strategies and tips to help you get out of those awkward moments, many of you rightfully pointed out that breaking into conversations was just as perplexing, especially at networking events, conferences, and other forced-conversation forums.

**There are two strategies that I recommend to ease in and out of group conversations effortlessly.**

Both begin with a polite interruption followed by a quick retreat. The first one takes some chutzpah, aiming itself at the whole group, while the second strategy targets a single person first before gaining an entrée into the larger group soon thereafter. Both can give you the opening you need to break the barrier of closed-circle groups and save you from a night of eating alone at the bar during a conference or event.

Let's take a closer look:

## **The Group Tackle**

The group tackle involves a brief introduction followed by an immediate retreat – an emphatic statement that the group continue the conversation without further ado.

Last summer, I attended a Mediabistro conference with headliner Tim Ferriss. I was dying to meet Tim so I stuck around after his keynote to introduce myself. Not surprisingly, nearly a dozen people had beaten me to the punch. Tim was holding court at the periphery of the auditorium with a rapt audience. Undeterred, I approached the group assertively, waited for Tim to see me and said the following:

1. Hi Tim, I'm Jodi Glickman Brown with Great on the Job; I didn't want to interrupt but I'm fascinated to hear about what you do.
2. Please, continue and I'll just listen in.

By not engaging in further conversation other than my quick intro, I made it explicitly clear that I didn't intend to take over the conversation or change the natural direction or momentum of the dialogue.

After lobbing in your quick intro, the next step is to go into "listen mode" for several minutes before venturing into the conversation again. Get a sense of the context and players around you. Then, once you've got your footing, feel free to chime in after the others know who you are and see that you've been listening respectfully to the dialogue going on around you.

After listening to Tim and the group for several minutes, I lobbed in a question related to Great on the Job and my own book deal with St. Martins' Press. I will never forget Tim's gracious response and his practical advice, and I'd be willing to bet both were to some degree due to the way I handled my entrance.

### **The Single Sideliner**

For those who are intimidated by the group approach, there's also a way to gain access to the group incrementally. Stand nearby a member of the group until you make eye-contact and then politely and unobtrusively introduce yourself to that person. After a one-line introduction, throw in a soft-sell about how you'd love an introduction to the broader group at the appropriate moment. It goes something like this:

1. Hi, I'm Jodi Glickman Brown with Great on the Job, how are you? I don't want to interrupt but I just wanted to listen in to the conversation...
2. I'd love an introduction to your colleagues at some point if you don't mind.

Then, if and when you do get that introduction to the broader group, follow up with a "so nice to meet you all" and then go back immediately into listen mode until you feel comfortable that you have something of value to add to the conversation. Alternatively, you now have the opening you need to follow up individually with any other members of the group once the gang has dispersed or there is a natural lull in the conversation.

In both of these approaches, you join the group as a voyeur, but a voyeur with a free pass – because you've made the cursory personal introduction without stealing anyone's thunder or ruffling any feathers and you've explained your benign intentions – you're just there to listen and learn. From that point of entry, you can then come from a position of strength to follow up with your new-found friends/colleagues/potential clients to begin a lasting and meaningful conversation.

*Jodi Glickman Brown is the founder and president of communication consulting firm Great on the Job. She is the author of the forthcoming book Great on the Job, to be published by St. Martin's Press in early 2011.*

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Jodi Glickman is a keynote speaker and founder of communication training and leadership development firm Great on the Job. She is the author of *Great on the Job* and a contributor to the *HBR Guide to Getting the Right Job*. Follow her on Twitter at @greatonthejob.

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