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On the Town: Holiday season an etiquette minefield

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I recently attended a holiday fashion and hair show where someone asked me: “What is it that you do, exactly?”

Some college business instructors encourage the phrase as a way to network, but personally, I think it’s impolite. It’s like talking about the weather when you run out of things to say.

So I asked etiquette expert Melissa Leonard of New York to share her thoughts. She agreed, saying it was indeed “an affected and rude question.”

Leonard presents business etiquette seminars to Fortune 100 corporations. She offers tips on everything from potty training to yachting on her site www.establishyourselfny.com.

She helped me rethink the way I answered the job question. I don’t want to seem arrogant, but I also don’t want to downplay my job. My practiced answer to the question is “I’m an entertainment reporter.”

“I think the more natural you answer,” Leonard said, “the less arrogant the response comes across. Simply say, ‘Oh, I work for a newspaper.’”

If the person inquires further, you can expand on the subject, she said.

“Being natural is the key and not giving them a litany of qualifications and achievements after the response,” which some do, she said. “The less you sound like a résumé, the better.”

Omahan Christian Burk’s family members still chuckle about an inappropriate bald comment his brother-in-law’s girlfriend made last year to his wife and her sister: “It’s interesting that all the men in your family are balding.”

Thankfully, Burk said, she’s an ex-girlfriend now.

Omahan Melissa Kucirek told me about a work-related goof she made.

About a month before an office holiday party, she was wrapping up a phone conversation with her IT director. Before she hung up, she said, “I love you, Larry.”

“Just out of habit,” she explained. “You know how you tell your family you love them on the phone.”

They both hung up awkwardly. Kucirek immediately called back to apologize. Larry, a well-established professional and former military man, laughed it off. At the holiday party, his wife came up to Kucirek and joked, “So, you’re trying to steal my Larry!”

Office holiday parties tend to be a breeding zone for embarrassing moments. Leonard said to keep in mind that it’s still a business function.

“So don’t do things that you might regret,” she said. “Everyone will remember, and if they don’t (because they drank too much), you can be sure others will fill them in.”

A few of her helpful hints:

Don’t imbibe to an extreme. You are bound to say and do things you wish you could take back. Try organizing a buddy system with a trusted friend, who can drag you home from the party before giving you the opportunity to embarrass yourself.

Leave your right hand open for handshakes. Drinks go in your left hand. There’s nothing worse than scrambling to wipe your sticky, wet hand on your pant leg before meeting someone. “People don’t want to shake a wet, cold paw,” Leonard said.

Remember that you kiss on the right cheek. This avoids awkward head bumping.

Do behave as if the chairman or CEO is keeping a watchful eye.

Be sure to thank the person in charge of organizing the event.

If gifts are given at the event, be sure to send a written thank-you note.

While socializing, don’t get too personal. Mind what you share with others. “If not,” Leonard said, “it’ll come back to haunt you.”

You should make an appearance, even if you don’t feel like attending the holiday party.

Go home at a decent hour; you’ll avoid drama that way.

If you decide to go to a different location with another employee, make sure you go with a group of people. “Otherwise,” Leonard said, “people will talk.”

Dress appropriately. It’s better to dress up, rather than down. If you are unsure of what to wear, keep it classy. Lack of clothing generally translates into a lack of respect. General rule of thumb is that those who’ve got it don’t really feel the need to flaunt it. “No need to look like you are going to an underground rave or out for a night of prowling,” Leonard said.

Don’t talk shop all night. People want to get to know each other and enjoy the evening. “Boring people with talk of work will make others avoid you,” she said.

Stay away from controversial topics — religion, politics and who got what in terms of bonuses.

Mingle, don’t monopolize.

Even if the office cutie is flirting with you, remember that this is not the time and place.

Be gracious and thank co-workers for their help over the past year.

Do use the time to network and be social with those you don’t yet know (new employees, spouses, etc.).

Don’t assume everyone celebrates Christmas.