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**Mary Ellen Biery • Jul. 31, 2014**



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customers, you must go beyond niceties and forge relationships based on credibility, reliability and a selfless orientation. Having meaningful small talk with clients and prospects can advance that goal.

Tuck these questions away for your next client meeting or your next [networking opportunity](#) and see if you don't find out something about the other person that can deepen your relationship and can provide some insight about how your firm might be able to [help by being a trusted advisor](#).

### **What's been keeping you busy lately?**

This is a good one to ask because it can generate responses from either a personal or business perspective – or perhaps both. Your client might mention the upcoming marriage of their child or they might indicate a key manager's health issue is affecting operations. A new contact at a networking event might mention a hobby that you share or they might indicate business is so strong they're looking to hire help. Besides being good topics to discuss so that you get to know the person better, these answers may also uncover challenges ([succession planning](#), risk management, strategic planning) for which you are equipped to provide counsel. This is also a good question because you can ask it of people you know and people you don't. If your mind has gone blank about someone you've met before, this opens the door for them to remind you of some details, and if you've never met, you can quickly find out what matters most to this person right now.

### **What's keeping you up at night?**

Though similar to the first question, this one is more likely to elicit some hint – however superficial – of a way that you might be able to help the contact. Asking someone, “How have you been?” is likely to be answered with “Pretty good” or some other generic response that really tells you nothing. By asking indirectly about the

biggest challenge facing them, you provide an opportunity for someone to be as

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## **How did you come to be in this line of work/How did you decide to start this particular business?**

Many of our relationships at work and outside of work (at the gym, at church, through volunteer opportunities) are based on what we have in common, and sometimes we forget to ask some basic questions that can tell us a lot about an acquaintance or client. Perhaps your client inherited the business but will lament that their own children don't want to succeed them. This is an opportunity down the road to discuss [succession planning](#). In any case, you're likely to learn more about your client or new acquaintance and what makes him or her tick than you would by commenting on the weather.

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