

Elevation in Action

Deconstructing

Chapter Four

DINNER A LA SHMOOZE

Mr. Shmooze picked me up in front of our office at 5:30 sharp. We were on our way to Morton's, a classic steakhouse and one of several places where Mr. Shmooze had long established himself as the unofficial "mayor." When he pulled up, Mr. Shmooze, as usual, was on the phone—this time with the head maitre d' at Morton's, attending to a dizzying variety of small details. He hung up and picked up right where we had left off earlier in the day.

"Client events are really at the heart of everything I do," Mr. Shmooze told me. "My overall goal is simple: I want everyone who attends to not only have a great time, but also to tell everyone else they had a great time. I want everyone to hope they get invited to the next party." He stopped and put the car in park, with the engine running. "Now, there are two keys to the success of any event: One, you need to break the event down to its component parts and make sure *each* part exceeds everyone's expectations."

"Elevation," I said.

"Bingo," said Shmooze.

"Two, you have to be an active director, like a movie director, choreographing the event and *watching everyone* like a hawk. It's okay to participate and have fun, but make no mistake about it—you are *working* the entire night.

"Take the dinner we will be having tonight. Keep an eye on the following components and tell me later what you have observed. Tell me whether you would grade each part 'average' or 'meets expectations' or 'excellent'—that is, 'exceeds expectations.' Take some notes discreetly. I will be interested in your observations. Here are the key components: car valet, hostess, bartender, dinner waiter, wine, appetizers, main course, dinner conversation, dessert, gifts and after-dinner drinks." I was writing as fast as I could when, suddenly, my door was opened by the Morton's car valet.

"Welcome to Morton's, sir...yo! Mr. Shmooze!"

"Kid, meet Bobby, the best car man in town. Bobby, this is my summer intern, Robert.

pre-
shmoozing

the
shmoozing
mindset,
explained

shmoozing
the
car man

He plays at Georgia Tech and he can hit the trey!”

“They can use it,” said Bobby. “The ACC is going to be brutal this year.”

“Bobby, let’s review your plan,” said Mr. Shmooze. “What have you got for me, baby?”

Two young men walked up as Bobby began to speak.

“Mr. Shmooze, we are prepared for seven cars tonight. I have your list of names and cars and I will greet everyone by name. My partners here will detail all seven cars. We have the car wash stuff out back. Julie will alert us when the folks are finished with dinner so we will be waiting for them.”

*Elevation
example
#1*

*Elevation
example
#2*

“We will accept no tips. I will simply tell everyone it’s taken care of. Absolutely no exceptions. We will attach the key rings you gave me to each set of keys. We will also place the cassettes or CDs you gave us right under the radio, in the ashtray, with your note. If anybody has had too much to drink, we will have a limo on standby who we can radio upon your request.”

*Elevation
example
#3*

“Kid, what did I tell you? Is he the best or what?” Mr. Shmooze stretched out his arm between the three men and instructed everyone, including me, to touch fists. Then, like a quarterback breaking a huddle, he took both sides of all the hands, shook them and shouted, “Ready...for...showtime!” We whooped and screamed, with high fives all around. The car team was ready!

shmoozing the team

As we rolled in the door, we were met by Julie, the maitre d’ named Ron and the associated staff. Everyone hugged. Then, for a moment, Mr. Shmooze huddled with Julie.

“Mr. Shmooze, I have your list. Everyone will be greeted by name. I will gather coats and I will hold the coat checks myself. I’ve memorized these anecdotes you suggested I use for each person,” she went on, hesitated as she added, “only I am a little concerned about the football player I am supposed to tell, ‘I hear you have great hands.’” She chuckled, and laughter broke the tension all around. “I will bring each person to you in the bar and tell Fred, the bartender, who is arriving so he can react accordingly.”

*Elevation
example
#4*

“Thank you, Julie,” said Mr. Shmooze. “Oh, you mentioned last week you like Lancome products. Here is a little something my wife recommended.” Mr. Shmooze handed her a gift box with a Lancome moisturizer product inside. There was a second hug, with smiles all around.

*Shmoozing
the hostess*

We made our way into the lounge, where Fred, the bartender, was waiting for us. Our drinks were waiting on the bar. Mine was a sparkling water. “When you are hosting,” said Mr. Shmooze, nodding toward the drinks, “start slow and build up steam. Remember, we are working!”

“How do you see things shaping up tonight?” asked Fred.

“This is a fun crowd, but I want to keep things under control, at least until after dinner. Let’s figure one drink in the lounge, then we’ll go to wine at the tables. Some of us will probably be back later to let our hair down.” Fred glanced quickly at Mr. Shmooze’s balding head but, before he could say anything, Mr. Shmooze quickly preempted him. “Don’t even go there!” They both had a good laugh.

*Elevation
example
#5*

“Okay, I have my list of names, drinks and anecdotes,” said Fred. “How does this gal, Denise, have time to be a top investment banker, a mom and teach a class at an inner-city high school?”

“Good question,” answered Mr. Shmooze. “Ask her.” Suddenly, Mr. Shmooze was lofted airborne, upwards from behind, firmly in the grasp of a powerful bear hug. He was being shaken up and down—no mean feat, considering his own 250-pound frame.

“Wise guy, huh?!” bellowed Big John, who had snuck up behind Mr. Shmooze and signaled Fred not to give him away. “I’ll show you good hands, you turkey!”

Fred held out a Grey Goose martini to Big John and said, “All right, guys! There will be no broken ribs in my bar tonight.” The floor shook as Big John dropped Mr. Shmooze to grab the martini.

*Elevation
example
#6*

“Jeez,” said Mr. Shmooze, “at least grab me after I have taken a breath. I almost blacked out, you animal!” The two of them continued their playful ribbing. Meanwhile, John’s partner was flirting with the hostess at the bar entrance. Fred quietly mixed him a Bacardi and Coke and walked around the bar to deliver it to him. Page, not a regular at Morton’s, looked at the drink, then at Fred, then just shook his head and laughed.

“Shmooze,” he called out, “you’re the man!”

The ritual was repeated as the rest of the guests arrived. Mr. Shmooze had made arrangements for eight guests, plus the two of us. There were four women and six men from various walks of life. I soon discovered, however, that they all would have something in common.

Elevation
example
#7

Dinner, of course, was outstanding. The wine captain did not just serve wines: He brought out several wonderful red and white wines, taking time to explain where they were from and why they were ready to drink at that moment.

Elevation
example
#8

Appetizers were served right away. But not just *any* appetizers—two gigantic, spectacular plates with a variety of seafood were placed at each end of the table. The food was shared “family style,” an experience that further bonded the guests, as they “oohed” and “ahhed” over the selections, exchanging compliments.

We never saw a menu. When it came time to order, the waiter simply announced that Mr. Shmooze had chosen three entrées for the group—one meat, one fish and one pasta—each of which the waiter described in great detail. Rather than going through the usually laborious and time-consuming ritual of choosing from a menu, the selections took only about two minutes total, thus preserving the pace and momentum Mr. Shmooze had carefully orchestrated.

Elevation
example
#9

Mr. Shmooze then did something I had never seen before. He stood up and announced, “I want Jim, Bill, Larry and Steve, and myself, to move two places to the right.” After some good-natured grumbling, the four of them got up and joined Mr. Shmooze in changing seats. The staff, whom Mr. Shmooze naturally had alerted, quickly swooped in to remove plates and replace silverware.

Elevation
example
#10

Within moments it became clear what a terrific concept this was. Everyone immediately engaged a new set of people and the simple act of moving sent a fresh charge of adrenaline through the atmosphere. The move was repeated again later, prior to dessert. But Mr. Shmooze had other tricks to pull from his sleeves. For example, about halfway through the entrée, he stood up and announced it was time to play a game.

Elevation
example
#11

He passed out cards and pens to everyone, telling them to “Write down one thing about yourself that is interesting or unusual or that you think people might be surprised you have done.” He said he would then collect the cards and guests would try to guess who matched what experience or characteristic. Of course, this sent yet another adrenaline rush through the group as everyone crackled and the volume rose as questions and wise-cracks flew in all directions: “Is this going to go beyond this room?” “Should we stay away from our sex lives?” “Are there any reporters in the room?”

Fabulous fodder for future shmoozing!

Needless to say, the next half-hour was filled with wonderful karma as people shared an incredible variety of their interests and experiences. The buttoned-down lady with Goldman Sachs had once sung in a punk rock band in college. Our NFL lineman was a gourmet cook whose specialty was soufflé. Jim Page and his daughter worked in a soup kitchen every Sunday morning. Nancy, the sales rep for a lighting company, raised and trained purebred standard poodles. By the time we had finished the entrée, virtually all walls between people had been broken down. Everyone now had something in common with someone else at the table. The body language was wonderful as people leaned in to learn more about each other's fascinating lives. Meanwhile, Mr. Shmooze had picked up another round of passionate insight. I was already envisaging Mary on the Internet looking up books on dogs and recipes for soufflés.

The incredible results of all this shmoozing!

At the appropriate time, Mr. Shmooze rose again and announced that dessert and cordials would be served in the lounge. Soon, everyone was back with Fred, as he stood over a variety of desserts at the bar. Each person chose a sampling of the offering, which were portioned and distributed by a waitress. Later, I asked Mr. Shmooze why he did this.

Elevation example #12

“The problem with dinners is that they can run too long. People can get tired after the main course, and that means losing a lot of momentum. I like to get people up and moving around, and people who need to leave a little early have a chance to scoot out.”

Of course, a dinner with Mr. Shmooze had to include a coup d'état. Sure enough, along came Jerry Gleade, Morton's General Manager.

“Folks, it was a pleasure serving you this evening. We certainly hope to see much more of you in the future. Please accept this token of appreciation.” Jerry proceeded to pass out nicely wrapped boxes, which, I later learned, were a set of fine Morton's steak knives.

Elevation example #13

This, of course, had been arranged in advance with Mr. Shmooze. It was a classic win/win situation for Morton's and for the new customers Mr. Shmooze had brought to the establishment.

As our guests began to make their exits, a wonderfully strange thing occurred. People who barely knew each other when the evening started were hugging, backslapping and expressing the warmest possible feelings. And, of course, there was much laughter and head shaking when their sparkling clean cars rolled up!

Remember elevation example #1? It completes the "circle of shmooze."

Finally, it was down to just Mr. Shmooze, Page, Wilson and me at the bar. I watched as the three of them played liar's poker. There was a warm glow as the colorful cast of characters from Morton's gathered for a recap to go with their nightcap.

"Guys," said Mr. Shmooze, "what do you think of my team?"

They both had a lot to say: "Unbelievable." "The best!" "You folks are too much!" As the praises continued, the Morton's crew basked in the warm glow that is "Mr. Shmooze."

P.S. Does all of this seem a little too rich for your blood? Don't worry! The story is slightly exaggerated for effect. It merely serves as an example of how you can elevate every client interaction to the highest possible level of shmooze.