

Making the Most of Small Talk



It's very easy to minimize the importance of small talk. To the people who are good at initiating casual conversations and connecting with others, it's second nature and automatically part of life. But to the rest of us, social situations and one-on-one encounters can leave us feeling completely ill-equipped. Let's face it: the ability to meet and greet and make people comfortable does make a big difference. Why? Because we live in a land of first impressions and we don't always get a second chance. So even if "expert chitchat" isn't on the top of your resume, here are some ways of handling the challenge which could open doors.

Names Come First

It might sound obvious, but it's rule number one: the simplest way to approach someone is to introduce yourself, by name. Forget about coming up with a witty opener. Stick with: "Hi, I'm ...". (Or if you're in a formal mood: "Hello, my name is...") Whatever the occasion or greeting, start by putting your name out there. This is true even if you've met the person before, or are pretty sure they know who you are. Don't assume. Re-introduce yourself. It never hurts.

Your second step is to get the other person's name. Again, this may strike you as a no-brainer, but it's the little things which slip our minds when we're uncomfortable. Which is why people can forget to offer their name in response to an introduction. So if a prompt is necessary, go ahead: "And you are...?"

After learning the person's name, repeat it out loud. This trick is pretty much guaranteed to help you remember names. If you can, try to fit the name into the conversation later, to reinforce it.

Looks Do Count

We're not talking physical appearance here, we're talking eye contact and the awareness of physicality. It's essential that you look the other person in the eye while talking. This doesn't mean staring, it means directly facing them, engaging their focus and staying connected—not allowing your eyes to wander off mid-sentence or roam around the room when listening.

Also, a firm handshake should generally accompany an introduction for both men and women. In most cases, the physical act can start to break down psychological barriers. Then, during the conversation, make yourself available by giving the other person your full attention. Stay aware of your own body language, and pick up clues from theirs.

It's Not About You

OK. This is *really* the number one small talk rule: don't talk so much as listen. As much as you're able, let the other person do the talking by asking questions. Given encouragement, most people are quite willing to share information about themselves, and express their opinions. So rather than bringing up topics that allow you to impress someone with your expertise, turn it around.

Find out about their interests, likes, dislikes and experiences. Ask questions which are open-ended and lead to other questions. And then, when you discover common ground and start to tell the story about the time when *you* got in trouble as a kid... catch yourself. Keep your contribution short and sweet, and bring it back to them.

Of course, this works a lot better if you're genuinely interested. But more often than not people are genuinely interesting, especially when they feel appreciated. Listening—really listening, not just biding time and scanning the room for someone better to talk to—takes practice but it's a skill worth developing.

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Keep Things Light

When venturing into a group of strangers or meeting someone for the first time, many people dread the prospect of small talk, or dismiss it as meaningless and boring. “Why waste my time?” is a question on some serious minds (along with “What am I going to talk about?”). But small talk does have a purpose in our society. Keeping things light and casual actually gives us more information about who someone is and how they live their lives than intense debates which are burdened by the weight of the world’s problems.

Talk about the weather, entertainment, books, current events, sports, hobbies or what you love and hate about your jobs. Compliment the other person if the compliment is sincere, and not inappropriate for the situation. Why not offer to buy someone a cup of coffee? It’s common courtesy. Stay positive, be yourself, and remember to smile.

Are there forbidden topics when it comes to small talk? Probably. As a general guide, avoid talking about religion, politics, marriage, divorce or sex when you’re just getting to know someone, whether on a personal or professional basis. But there are

always exceptions. To judge each situation, pay attention to whether the other person seems comfortable with your discussion; you never want anyone to be embarrassed about what they’ve shared with you. And if you find the conversation becoming emotionally charged during a strictly social interaction, change the subject.

Is That It?

Even if things are going well and you wish you could go on talking forever, let the other person decide how long the conversation lasts. Get signals from their body language, listen to their choice of words and when it’s time, make a graceful exit. Remember that by definition, small talk is just that: a short chat.

Why, then, put so much time and energy into mastering the fine art of small talk? Because “Why bother?” chatter often marks the beginning of a significant relationship. You never know who might become an important part of your life, or what conversations will later seem pivotal. Becoming adept at that bothersome little thing called small talk can be an investment which truly pays off.