Small Talk

Idea In Short

In business, everything starts with a conversation. Whether it's making a sale, hiring an employee or negotiating a lease, excellent conversational skills are a must. There is often more at stake during casual conversations than in other more formal situations when you are more prepared.

Even though it often revolves around trivial topics, small talk serves a crucial function as a social lubricant and facilitates interaction with others. You can gauge your mood, interests, and potential for personal or professional relationships through small talk. Small talk can lead to more substantial conversations. The following tips can help you get there.

Ask Open-Ended, Specific Questions

Asking questions that can't be answered with just a "yes" or "no" encourages others to talk. You can avoid asking questions that might be difficult to answer or elicit longer responses by using the phrase Tell me about.... Instead of asking, Are you married?, try Tell me about your family. Specific inquiries, such as What were your favorite holiday traditions when you were a child? are superior to general inquiries, such as How are you? because they provide the other person with context around which to frame an answer. Topics for small talk include:

- **Questions regarding the event or location:** Why did you choose this location or event?
- **Activities for leisure** (such as hobbies, sports, trips, movies, or plans for the weekend): What are you anticipating this weekend?
- **Interests in the workplace:** What aspects of your work do you find most satisfying?

Try The CAAA Approach To Break The Ice

CAAA is an acronym for a four-step process to help you initiate conversation and not simply ask question after question like you are conducting an interrogation.

- **Comment** positively on something you observe or have in common (like the event) or observe and compliment a person's unique attire. Consider wearing a "conversation piece" item yourself (such as a Toastmasters pin) to have a handy topic to discuss.
- **Ask** an easy-to-answer, open-ended question related to your comment.
- **Affirm** their answer after listening to their response, ideally paraphrasing what they said.
- **Add** to the conversation by extending the topic with your own experience or by pivoting to another related topic. (You can also ask a follow-up question.)

CAAA Example

Situation: Two people who don't know each other are standing in line for desserts at a holiday work party.

Person 1 (Comment and ask): Wow! All the desserts look delicious! What looks especially good to you? Person 2: I've got my eye on the Tiramisu. Person 1 (Affirm and add): Ahh! Tiramisu. That's my favorite. My mom made it for special occasions and it brings back many memories. I bet you have some foods that bring back memories.

As you converse, you will want to focus on finding common ground topics you can take to a deeper level.

Pay Attention To Body Language And Actively Listen

People communicate using much more than just the words they speak. You can encourage people to talk with your body language. Try using **NOSE**-y body language.

- **Nod:** Nod to engage with what they are saying
- **Open Body Language:** Keep your arms uncrossed and your hands visible
- **Smile:** Smile when you first initiate conversation and keep a pleasant expression
- **Eye Contact:** Make eye contact as culturally appropriate

You can also use small verbal comments like uh huh to encourage the other person to continue speaking. You should also actively listen to the other person and pay attention to their body language and voice. If you're distracted by something unrelated or by your phone, you can't do that. Pay attention to the other person. And then respond by occasionally reflecting back ("So, what you're saying is ...") and asking clarifying questions.

Consider Cultural Differences

> Small talk differs across cultures, not only in how it's done but also in terms of its role and importance in business communication

says Andy Molinsky, the author of Global Dexterity: How to Adapt Your Behavior Across Cultures without Losing Yourself in the Process.

> In many cultures—especially those with more formal rules for communication and with a strong emphasis on social hierarchy—it's considered inappropriate to engage in casual conversation with superiors. In addition, it can also feel impolite and even dangerous to openly express your opinion during small talk, especially if it could potentially conflict with the other person's opinion.

Avoid Awkward Topics

While acceptable small-talk topics vary depending on culture, you generally want to avoid discussing the following topics with someone you don't know well:

- Your health issues
- Personal/confidential information
- Controversial topics
- Inappropriate jokes

> Personal questions you do not know the answer to are never a good idea. For example, you will want to avoid conversational landmines such as, How is it that your son looks just like you and your daughter looks like she could be from a different family? or When are you two going to make me a grandmother?

says Debra Fine, author of The Fine Art of Small Talk.

Encourage others to talk by asking open-ended questions that can't be answered with just a "yes" or "no."

If you make an awkward comment, you can admit it, apologize, and maybe even laugh about it.

Construct A Conversation Resume

Patrick King, author of Better Small Talk: Talk to Anyone, Avoid Awkwardness, Generate Deep Conversations, and Make Real Friends, recommends creating a conversation resume to lean on when attending events any time of year, but it can be especially handy during business networking sessions. It should include talking points about your daily life, personal background, notable experiences, and current events. Remember to review this resume before you head to social events, and you'll be able to keep up with just about anyone.

> The conversation resume allows you to remind yourself that you're not such a boring person after all

It's the difference between having a good answer or story when someone asks, What did you do last weekend? versus simply saying, Oh, not too much. Some TV. What about you?

King suggests regularly updating your conversation resume with talking points about your daily life, personal background, notable experiences, and current events. Review this resume before you head into socially intense situations.

> If you've ever felt like your mind was going blank, this is the cure!7 Practice in Toastmasters.

Pre-pandemic, when most members were meeting in person, they often had casual conversations before, after, and sometimes during a meeting. It's much more challenging to engage in small talk in online meetings, where it seems the etiquette is to talk to everyone or

don't talk. You can build a little extra time at the beginning and end of meetings for unstructured conversation, or open meetings with individual check-ins or an icebreaker question.

Summary

Small talk might start small. It might be quick. It might seem irrelevant at first. But ultimately, small talk is about human connection. It's worth making an effort. Being a good conversationalist isn''t necessarily a natural trait. It can take thought and practice. Apply these tools and improve your ability to converse in any situation.