

BUSINESS INSIDER

10 ways to get better at small talk



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OCT. 13, 2015, 1:38 PM

Whether you're speed-dating, networking, or simply socializing, knowing how to start an engaging chat is a must.

But it's not always easy. What if you and your conversation partner seem to have nothing in common? What if there's an awkward pause? What if you accidentally insult the person?

To help you out, we reviewed the Quora thread "How can I get better at small talk?" and highlighted some of the most helpful responses.

Read on to impress new acquaintances with your masterful conversation skills.

1. Demonstrate interest in your conversation partner

Several Quora users noted that the best way to keep a conversation rolling is to show you care about what the other person has to say.



Knowing how to start an engaging chat is a must.

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"If you don't fundamentally care about the person you are speaking with, that will show, and that may be the primary reason why you are running out of things to discuss," writes Kai Peter Chang.

That also means letting your conversation partner share information about himself or herself.

"Let the other person speak more," writes Anam Gulraiz. "People LOVE talking about themselves."

2. Ask open-ended questions

Instead of asking yes/no questions that lead to dead ends, encourage your conversation partner to share some more detail about his or her life.

"In general, open-ended questions lead to more conversational paths," says Craig Welland.

For example, instead of asking a fellow party guest, "Are you here with your family?" you might ask, "How did you meet the host?"

3. Allow your conversation partner to teach you

"If there's a subject you're not familiar with, just be honest with that person and nine out of ten times they'll teach you about it," writes Michael Wong.

It goes back to that central idea of letting other people do most of the talking. Asking the other person to explain what they mean means they'll be talking for at least another few minutes.



In the days leading up to a social function, take time to peruse the news.

Flickr / Elbert Barnes

4. Read the news

In the days leading up to a social function, take time to peruse the news, "including the sections that don't really interest you," writes Mark Simchock.

That way, if a conversation should come to an abrupt halt, you can fill the silence with, "Hey, did you hear about ... " or "Man, how about that ... ?"

5. Share anecdotes

Don't hesitate to let your conversation partner know that you can relate to what he or she is telling you, says Ellen Vrana.

"This forms a bond," she adds.

For example, if your partner says he or she spent time living in another country and you did as well, share a story or two about your years abroad. You'll likely prompt the other person to tell you about some similar memories.

6. Practice the FORM technique

Robert Adams uses a special mnemonic to keep conversations flowing easily:

- **F-amily:** Do you have kids? Where is your family from? How long have you lived around here?
- **O-ccupation:** What do you do for a living? What is that like? Have you always been a circus acrobat?
- **R-ecreation:** What do you guys do for fun? How long have you been involved in SCA? Where do you buy chain-mail, or did you make it yourself?
- **M-oney:** What happened with the price of gas? Did you see that last school-bond issue? How do you think the new liquor-store laws will shake out? Anybody you know lose their job lately?

7. Be honest

"There's nothing wrong with just saying, 'You know, I hate small talk, so how about we talk about something big?'" writes Derek Scruggs.

Chances are, your conversation partner will feel somewhat relieved.

Scruggs recommends having on hand a few "big" questions that promote intimacy, including, "What's something that scared you today?" and "Are you happy with your current lifestyle?"



Listen to talk-show hosts and emulate how they keep conversations flowing.

AP Photo/Courtesy of Harpo Studios

8. Copy good conversationalists

"Listen to comedians, listen to talk show hosts, listen to real people," recommends Edahn Small.

Try to remember the kinds of questions they ask, how they follow up on the other person's answers, and even how they make use of silence. Chances are good that they learned the same way.

9. Boost your conversation partner's self-esteem

Flatter people in order to capture and hold their interest, suggests Joe Goebel.

"Try to make everyone you talk with feel a little better about themselves after having met and talked to you," he writes.

10. Practice with everyone you meet

Whether it's the doorman at work or a fellow passenger on the train, try your hand at small talk with everyone, says Rohan Sinha.

Eventually, you'll start feeling more comfortable striking up and maintaining interesting conversations.



The 10 Big Rules of Small Talk

Know what to say in a social situation—and when and how to say it.

By **Jennifer Tung**

Anyone who's been caught at a wedding reception or a cocktail party discussing recent precipitation knows that making small talk isn't as easy as it sounds. On the contrary, conversing with strangers can be awkward, stilted, even painful. But there is an art to it, and it can be mastered. "A golden rule is that you don't have to be brilliant—just nice," says Bernardo J. Carducci, Ph.D., director of the Shyness Research Institute at Indiana University Southeast, in New Albany, Indiana. "If you start with simple, even obvious comments, that makes it easier for others." Here are 10 rules—gleaned from communication specialists and women whose jobs require extensive networking and party-going—for navigating sticky small-talk situations with style and grace.



Photo by Rob Howard

1. Do a Little Homework

If your conversational skills are more reminiscent of Oscar the Grouch than Oscar Wilde, a bit of preparation is in order. “As I drive to a party, I try to come up with two or three things to talk about in case the conversation runs dry,” says Debra Fine, lecturer and author of *The Fine Art of Small Talk* (\$17, amazon.com). “If I’ve met the host before, I try to remember things about her, like her passion for skiing or a charity we’re both involved in.” Anne-Marie Fowler, a San Francisco investment adviser and president of the fund-raising group San Francisco Ballet Encore!, attends business and social functions as often as seven nights a week. She says, “I think about the key guests and what I can say to bring them into their element.” For instance, when Fowler attended the party of a recently retired CFO, she remembered that he loves modern art and asked him about his collection. To keep your conversation timely and lively, Carducci suggests scanning newspaper headlines and movie and book reviews. “And I listen to a lot of NPR,” he says.

2. Greet People Appropriately

To kiss or not to kiss? The question is so universal (and, for some, vexing) that Hamlet might have asked it. Generally, a firm handshake is a safe, neutral bet. In social situations where faces are more familiar, the rules soften. “If someone’s a good friend, I kiss, and if someone makes that overture to me, I’ll respond accordingly,” says Barbara Roberts, a board member of the Saint Louis Art Museum who chaired a recent fund-raising gala. Cindy Cawley, an active fund-raiser and volunteer in Omaha, Nebraska, adds, “If you’ve kissed someone before, remember to do it again, or they may feel shunned. And if you’re greeting a husband and wife, peck both, or it will look like you’re picking a favorite.”

3. Remember Names

Introductions tend to pass in a blur, with both parties quickly blurting out names and then taking sips of wine. As a result, no one remembers who anyone is. The solution: Slow down and stay present. “I always repeat a name once or twice after I’ve heard it,” says Cathy Filippini, a governing member of the Chicago Symphony and a sustaining fellow at the Art Institute of Chicago. If someone has an unusual name, take time to learn it, advises Fine. “Don’t just move on,” she says. “Say, ‘I’m sorry. Let me try that. Did I get it right?’” Similarly, if someone mumbles, says Fowler, “say, ‘Would you kindly repeat your name?’ And when you speak your own name, do so clearly.”

If you forget a name, discreetly ask a third party for help, or listen for it in conversation. If all else fails, come clean. “Don’t panic, and don’t feel awful,” says etiquette guru Peggy Post. “Just say, ‘I can’t believe it. I’ve just drawn a blank.’ It’s such a normal, widespread, human happening that most people will understand.”

4. Don’t Hold Back

Begin the conversation by giving the other person something to work with. But don’t put her to work. For example, if asked what you do for a living, don’t give the short answer, thereby forcing the other person to scramble for more questions. “Embellish your response,” says Carducci. “Say, ‘I’m an accountant, but I don’t cook the books.’” If someone asks what you’ve been up to, “say, ‘We took the kids to Italy this year.’” suggests Fine. “Now they know that you have kids and have been to Italy.”

5. Draw the Other Person Out

“People love to talk about themselves, so be a great listener,” says Cawley. Roberts concurs: “If we’re at an exhibition, I ask what their favorite painting was. If I’ve never met them before, I ask what they do

professionally and what they enjoy recreationally.” Filippini says, “I’ll ask if they’ve seen a particular exhibit or play.” The questions don’t have to be that specific, adds Fine: “You can simply say, ‘Bring me up to date.’” Questions can also be utterly superficial—to begin with. “I always ask about someone’s shoes or jewelry,” says Fowler. “Both make statements about a person. I often ask what meaning a piece of jewelry has to its wearer, and that opens up a lot of other topics.”

6. When in Doubt, Discuss the Setting

It sounds like a cop-out, but it works. “It’s something you share,” says Carducci. “If you comment on the good music or the interesting floral arrangements or how long a line for food is, and the other person agrees, that means they’re willing to talk to you.” Another fail-safe, setting-specific question is “How do you know the host?”

7. Revive a Dying Conversation.

Don’t panic when there’s a lull in the conversation. “Silences aren’t as long as you think they are,” says Carducci. “Remember that if you say something, the other person may need to process it. Think of silence as a transition.” Roberts adds, “Sometimes silence is appropriate. You don’t want to seem like a babbling idiot.” If you sense that the other person is dying to get away, give him the opportunity to do so. Otherwise, take the conversation in a new direction using one of the above tactics. “Throw something out there,” says Carducci, “and don’t worry about making the transition smooth.”

8. Make Proper Introductions

The true hallmark of a skilled and gracious small-talker is the ability to introduce people with ease. In addition to announcing names, offer a piece of information about each person, or a shared interest, thereby facilitating a conversation. “I try to be genuine and sincere and convey that each person is important, and I try to say both names slowly,” says Roberts, who gives the following example: “Kate, this is Jane. Jane and her husband just moved here from Cincinnati. Jane is interested in painting and is an artist herself. Jane, this is Kate. Kate is the museum’s director of communications.”

Things get tricky when you forget one of the names. In that instance, “mention one person’s name and gesture to the other one,” says Post. “That person will usually sense you’re at a loss and volunteer their name.” Cawley cleverly passes the buck: “I say the name of the person I do know and then say to her, ‘I’ll put you in charge of the introduction.’”

9. Defuse Unpleasant Situations

For every group of lovely people you meet at a party, there’s bound to be a lemon. Type 1 is the person who has met you on several occasions but acts as if he’s never seen you before in his life. “I don’t like to play games, so I acknowledge that we’ve met right away,” says Cawley. “I’ll say, ‘You may not recall, but I remember meeting you at a fund-raiser two years ago.’”

Type 2 invades your personal space. “I don’t say anything; I just move back,” says Filippini. “If they get me against a wall, I maneuver around them.” Cawley also steps back, and “if they follow me, I extend whichever hand is holding my cocktail, so they’re an arm’s length away,” she says.

Type 3 won't stop talking about himself and hasn't asked you a single question. "If someone is that self-centered, exit the conversation gracefully," says Carducci. Which leads us to:

10. Make a Clean Getaway

"Use the phrase 'I need,'" advises Fine. "I need to get some food; I haven't eaten all day. I need to talk to a client over there. I need to meet the speaker." Freshening your drink, using the restroom, chatting with a friend who has just arrived, and checking in with your spouse are also valid needs.

"If you can mention something from the conversation that meant something to you," says Roberts, "it shows that you're not running off because you're bored. I say, 'I've enjoyed talking to you about your volunteer work, and I hope to talk to you again.'"

For extreme situations, Fowler recommends establishing "rescue me" signals with a partner or a friend to let her know when you need help bailing out of a conversation. Cawley has paged herself to escape a dull party. "My favorite is to ask someone else nearby—a spouse or a good friend—to dance," says Fowler, provided there's music and others are dancing, of course.