

Small Talk Made Simple: 6 Tips

By Rachel Wagner, February 2008

Do you dread having to make “polite conversation” at networking events and cocktail receptions? If so, you’re not alone. According to talk-show host Larry King, “The vast majority of people would rather jump out of an airplane without a parachute than sit next to someone they’ve never met at a dinner party.”

But, small talk matters in the business arena. It builds rapport and often leads to bigger things, like new clients and new business. In fact, people who know what to say and when to say it are viewed as friendly, gracious and interesting.

While some are born with the gift of small talk, it can be developed through practice. Here are six timeless tips to enhance your mingle-ability anywhere your business takes you:

Be well read. Read about a variety of subjects. News and sports are great “small talk” topics to get a conversation going. Even if you’re not a big sports fan, at least “be in the know” about major sports headlines.

Keep the spotlight on others. Ask about their job, and if they’re new in town where they previously lived and worked, and what they enjoy about their new city and new job. At a conference, ask what sessions they’ve found to be particularly good. If they’ve traveled from out of town, ask how their trip was. People will think you are fascinating if you get them to talk about themselves and their interests.

Keep it light. Stay clear of heavy or culturally sensitive issues, as well as personal illness, money woes and marital problems. Politics, however, is now fairly standard small-talk fare. Also, it’s perfectly acceptable to discuss the weather!

Be a good listener. Careful listening helps you to be a better conversationalist. Why? Because you are able to ask good questions and keep the conversation going.

Send a friendly message. Body language speaks before you do. Avoid folding your arms across your chest so you don’t unintentionally appear aloof or uninterested. Have good eye contact and smile!

Be you. Conversations are all about making a connection. You don’t have to be clever or quotable. Just be sincere, show empathy, enthusiasm, and a willingness to listen, and you can’t help becoming a master of small talk!

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