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## Small talk can build big relationships

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**Question:** Can you help me understand the importance of small talk? It seems so pointless.

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**Answer:** Small talk may seem superficial, but it is a vital component of business and social interactions, and its importance should not be underestimated. When done sincerely, small talk is important because it creates a personal connection when meeting someone for the first time or when greeting someone.

I've written about how important first impressions are, and small talk is an integral part of first impressions. Your ability to do it effectively will be a reflection of your interpersonal and communication skills. Business is about building relationships, whether new or existing, and using small talk to deepen those relationships is meaningful.

There are many studies that prove the importance of small talk. One report, by Midwestern University, found that a lack of communication skills rather than technical skills prevented employees from upward mobility. In addition, a study from Stanford University School of Business found that GPA has very little effect on our business success, while the ability to communicate has a much greater impact.

The takeaway is that small talk is a component of broader communication skills, and being comfortable and effective at it can help you advance in your career.

I was recently in New York City and bonded with a woman while trying on beautiful shoes. One thing led to another and she mentioned she worked for Shape Magazine. How wonderful! I was in the middle of writing an article on appropriate corporate gym attire and I asked what was new in the world of fitness fashion. It just so happened that this woman was the PR director at Shape Magazine, and she put me in touch with the fashion editor. As a result of this "small talk" conversation I met two interesting women who helped make my article more credible.

For some, small talk comes easily, and for others it is an intimidating experience. A little preparation goes a long way, and it is easy to learn how to make small talk. Here are some general guidelines to help aid in the art of small talk:

A foundation of small talk is to find subjects that have commonality, so you can quickly make a connection. Be prepared. Read newspapers, watch the news, and stay up on current events.

We don't have to be experts in every topic, but it is important to be aware of what is going on in our world. If you are attending a business function, be aware of the trends in that industry. Be prepared to discuss three or four different topics.

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Practice makes perfect. Don't just use small talk in business but in all aspects of your life. Hone your skills by conversing with people you encounter on a daily basis: the barista at the coffee shop, the butcher, the cashier at the grocery. Everyone is fair game, and the more you can break out of your comfort zone the more confident you will become.

Know appropriate topics to discuss. Contrary to popular opinion I do not advocate talking about the weather, especially at a business function. The purpose of small talk is to create a connection. Sports are a great topic to discuss. The Olympics were fascinating, and there were many stories within the Olympics that make for interesting conversation. Celebrity gossip is always a safe yet colorful topic. Industry news and current events will make for up-to-date conversations. Never underestimate the power of a compliment. Commenting on a woman's shoes or a man's tie is always a good conversation starter.

Know the topics to avoid. Again, a little preparation goes a long way, and knowing which topics are taboo is vital. Never participate in office gossip and avoid conversations that involve religion and politics. Be very careful when telling jokes, as what is funny to one person is offensive to another.

Small talk is an essential business tool, and it can be used well and used to our advantage. Remember the goal of small talk is to create interest, to build relationships and to be memorable. Mastering the art of small talk can be achieved by all with a little preparation and a lot of confidence.

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