

Small Talk is a “Big” Part of Networking

As you begin your post-University career search, you will often hear it stated the best way to find the ‘perfect job role’ is through Networking. In a 2016 LinkedIn survey, it was found that 85% of the jobs were secured as a direct result of Networking.

One key factor in successful Networking is Small Talk. Think of Small Talk as a warmup before engaging in the deeper conversation such as an Informational or job interview. One third of conversation in American culture is considered Small Talk. Small Talk creates rapport with a person and helps establish trust in the relationship.

We are often anxious about engaging in Small Talk. Maybe it is because we don’t feel adequate, engaging enough, or it just isn’t a comfortable activity for us. It’s time to change your mindset - people work better with people the like or feel connected to.

Small Talk begins with the right mindset. Here are three ways to establish the right Small Talk mindset shared by author, Darren Hardy:

1. **Be excited when you speak with the person:** Maybe it is cashier at the grocery store, the salesclerk at your favorite clothing store, or even a corporate recruiter – regardless, be excited to talk with them.
2. **Talk to them like they are a friend:** Call them by name, show interest in them.
3. **Assume they are awesome:** To think of them as “awesome” means you are drawn to speaking with them and learning more from them.

Hardy goes on to recommend a few tips to beginning and continuing Small Talk with someone:

1. **Compliment the person before your introduction:** “Your sneakers are amazing! Hi, my name is...”
2. **Ask questions of the person:** Maybe ask them about where they purchased those sneakers you just complimented them on.
3. **Actively listen:** What that means is maintain eye contact, provide positive facial expressions to the conversation (smile, an inquisitive look, etc.), and most importantly – do **NOT** look at your phone.
4. **Keep nudging the conversation forward:** “These Career Fairs” are always interesting. Did you meet any employer that surprised you in what they said?’
5. **Offer a “Wild Thought for the Day”:** “I am a pet owner. Did you know that in 2020 38% of pet owners included their pet in their wedding?”

The whole purpose of Small Talk is to make an emotional connection with the person and establish a desire in them to move into a deeper conversation with you (like the interview).

For International Students, American Small Talk can appear natural and comfortable for Americans but may feel inappropriate based on one’s home country culture. In fact, common to American culture is to begin conversations with those you don’t know leveraging Small Talk. These interpersonal interactions can influence the way people create personal bonds.

MBA.com provides several tips for International Students looking to enhance their American Small Talk skills A few of the key tips include:

1. Small talk is built on asking questions, listening to the responses, and probing a bit more
2. Don't rush to add words to a conversation as it is appropriate to have a pause allowing the person to consider your question
3. Get over discomfort of Small Talk. Step up to a conversation with someone you don't know and set goals of who to speak with, for example at a Career Fair with an admired Company representative

Successful use of Small Talk is an acquired skill; practice is critical to successfully leveraging Small Talk in your Networking efforts. Always be respectful in the way you approach Small Talk and remember their time is valuable. And do not to take too much of the time away from the rest of the deeper conversation in an interview as an example.

Resources:

1. MBA.com: "6 Small Talk Tips for International Students"
2. Betterup.com: "How to Build Rapport: 6 Tactics to Build Strong Relationships"
3. Harvard Business Review: "The Big Challenge of American Small Talk"
4. FastCompany: "The Secret Science Behind the Power of Small Talk"
5. DarrenDaily On-Demand: "Episodes 1088/1089: How to Master Small Talk"