

# How to Be a Better Conversationalist

*Good Small Talk Makes Us Liable, But It's Easy to Get Rusty—How to Avoid Dominating and Being Dominated in a Conversation*

By **ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN** [CONNECT](#)



For those born without the gift of gab, the art of elegantly starting, sustaining and stopping a discussion takes study and practice. Elizabeth Bernstein joins Lunch Break to explain why experts say small talk is actually a big deal. Photo: Getty Images.

Jason Swett still cringes when he remembers the party in Atlanta 10 years ago, where, drink in hand, he tried "to impress the local Southern belles," he says, by talking—nonstop.

He told the six or so people he'd just met the tale of how once at a grocery store he helped apprehend a thief who'd stuffed steaks down his pants. And the story about the time he spotted a bike at the bottom of a pond in a local park and jumped in to retrieve it. And then the one about how he smoked himself out of his own basement by setting off illegal fireworks.

Eventually, Mr. Swett asked the group, "Wanna hear another one?" The reply was unanimous. "No!" six people shouted in unison.

There is an art to elegantly starting, sustaining and ending a dialogue with strangers or friends. Experts call it conversational intelligence. Others call it the gift of gab. Hard as it may be for chatty people to believe, not everyone is born with it. For many, it takes study and practice.

Some people dismiss small talk as mere chitchat, an unnecessary and annoying waste of time. Many men consider it a female thing. But experts say casual conversation is essential social grease—a ritual that helps us connect with friends, colleagues and people we've just met.



Nicole Kalvaitis

People respond to conversations about themselves, says Jason Swett, of Grand Rapids, Mich.

in Rock Hill, S.C.

We can use small talk to signal our friendly intent and to get people to like us. It can lead to more-significant conversations that spark friendships and clinch deals. Still, for many it remains a mysterious and challenging art.

Small talk occurs in all cultures but the substance differs. Americans generally have an international reputation for being good at small talk although the content is often seen by other cultures as superficial, says Roger Baumgarte, professor emeritus of psychology at Winthrop University,

Unfortunately, we seem to be getting less good at it. (Been on the Web lately?) So much of our lives have moved online, we've become less adept at in-person interactions. Experts worry that, thanks to videogames and texting, younger generations aren't learning the basics of real conversation.

## Be a Better Small Talker



You can develop your conversational intelligence. It isn't complicated, especially if you keep this rule of thumb in mind: Focus on the other person. "Let it be known that you want to make conversation," says Bernardo J. Carducci, professor of psychology and director of the Shyness Research Institute at Indiana University Southeast, in New Albany, Ind. "Make it easy for the other person."

A successful conversation can be divided into five stages, Dr. Carducci says. In the "Getting Started" stage, you signal your desire to talk with a simple opening line based on something both of you are observing or experiencing in your shared surroundings. ("Hot enough for you?")

In the second stage, the "Personal Introduction," you should mention something about yourself, state your name if appropriate and provide hints for topics to talk about. ("It seems like the whole city is on vacation this week.")

"A good personal introduction helps to move the conversation forward," Dr. Carducci says. He encourages people who aren't adept conversationalists to keep a few "go to" topics in their back pocket.

In the third stage, "Pre-Topical Exploration," you and your conversation partner are looking for common ground. This is a good time to ask questions, and to refer back to and build upon things said earlier. ("Did you get a chance to get away this summer?") When the other person introduces a topic, you should respond—or quickly offer an alternative.

Fear of awkward silences is common in people who aren't natural conversationalists. Experts say don't worry when it gets quiet. The other person is probably just thinking of something to say. I could chat with a tree, and even I was stumped recently after I took my seat on a plane and the man next to me responded to my opening line—"I hate to leave Honolulu"—with "I've been married 24 years."

In the "Post-Topical Elaboration" stage, your job is to keep the conversation going. "Good conversation is topic-building," says Dr. Carducci, so you should make links between subjects. ("I took a 'staycation' and saw some excellent movies.")

As in every stage, you should be careful not to talk too much. This means you should avoid your favorite topic, whether it is yoga or your kid's soccer tournament.

But don't let the other person hog all the airtime, either. If this starts to happen, mention something about yourself when he or she takes a breath. "Bad small-talkers are too self-critical, so they shut themselves down," says Dr. Carducci, who wrote "The Pocket Guide to Making Successful Small Talk."

The final stage is the "Wrap Up." Here, you signal that the end is near and show appreciation ("Nice chatting with you.") Demonstrate that you were listening by summarizing highlights of the conversation ("Thanks for those movie recommendations.") Look for a way to stay in touch, if you would like—offer a business card or ask if the person is on Facebook.

Ask a lot of questions. People love to talk about themselves and often will think you are a great conversationalist if you talk about them and not yourself. Don't let the conversation stall after the person has answered—be ready with follow-up questions or build on the topic. And avoid obvious inquiries. Cathy Svacina, a 60-year-old marbles expert and tournament referee from Kansas City, Mo., likes to ask people what they do for fun. "That immediately tells me more about who they are than what they do for work," she says.

Listening is crucial. Dan Nainan, 32, a comedian from Manhattan, has learned to summarize what the other person says. ("So you think that..." or "So what you're saying is...") "A conversation can go on indefinitely if you do this," he says.

Have a line ready for when you want the conversation to end. Ella Rucker, a 40-year-old freelance writer from Bronx, N.Y., smiles and says, "As much as I've enjoyed our conversation, I'll let you continue with your evening."

Mr. Swett's small-talk epiphany came several years ago, after he read Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People." In 2010, he joined Toastmasters International, a group that helps people with public speaking. "I learned that people are mostly interested in themselves," says the

29-year-old Grand Rapids, Mich., software engineer. "If you talk to the other person about them, they'll be much more responsive and interested than if you talk about you."

Recently, Mr. Swett had a job interview at a telecommunications firm, where, rather than just talking about himself, he began by asking questions and then responded to questions others raised. One of the executives nodded approvingly and asked, "Did someone coach you on this interview?"

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