

The Small Talk Cheat Sheet

General Best Practices for Small Talk

Let Someone Else Take the Floor First and Listen for Clues

When other people are given an opportunity to speak first, they tend to feel like they are in a safer environment.¹ See if you can find clues about topics they enjoy (for example, by hearing cues like “I love...”) and topics that would be less enjoyable for them (for example, when you hear things like “I’m so frustrated with...”). Then, follow the more positive lines of conversation.

Be Genuinely Positive

While you don’t want to be a flatterer or manipulative, it’s a good idea to take opportunities to support people around you with genuine compliments. Next time you’re meeting with someone and you like something, say it!

Follow Opportunities to Talk about Their Interests

When you discover that someone has an interest in a topic, follow up on it. People are usually open to talking about things they enjoy, so take it as an opportunity to learn more about them and build some relationship capital.

Use Non-verbal Communication (Nods, Positive Utterances) When Appropriate

People tend to feel comfortable when their counterpart (you) reminds them that they are engaged in the conversation, so use little utterances (like “em hmm”) and nods to show them that you’re receiving their communication.

¹ “First Impressions: The Science of Meeting People.” *Wired Magazine*, November 2012 Issue. Accessed online at <http://goo.gl/a4iKkj> on November 7th, 2014.

Sample Questions for Small Talk

Professional Questions

- “How are you connected to the people who organized this event?”
- “What are the new storylines in your line of work?”
- “If there was no risk of failure, what kind of organization or business would you want to start?”
- “Is there someone inside your organization that you’re really proud of at the moment?”

Informal Questions

- “Have you read anything recently that you found particularly thought provoking?”
- “What do you like to do in your free time?”
- “Is this the first time you’ve attended this event?”
- “What’s your favorite city in the world?”
- “If you could summarize your outlook on life in six words, what would you say?”
- “What’s something that most people would never guess about you even after knowing you for some time?”
- “How far east do you think you can go before you’re heading west?”