

Lifehacks

How to Start Conversations with Strangers



Nick Sparks

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Introduction

Chris: Hi. This is Lifehacks.com and this is the course on how to start conversations with strangers. I'm Chris Goodmacher and I'll be facilitating the course. The course is going to be led by social and dating coach, Nick Sparks. You can find out more information about him at sparksofattraction.com. With that, I'll let Nick take things away.

Nick: Once again, thanks for having me, Chris. It's great to be here.

As you've already introduced, I'm going to be talking about starting conversations with random strangers, which I think is a pretty universal skill. It's definitely a skill that most people don't have. It's definitely a skill that is reserved for those few social butterflies or social connectors, but it's definitely a skill that can be developed by anyone no matter how shy or introverted they are. I've worked with people in the darkest depths of social anxiety and this is something that can certainly be developed for anyone, anytime, or anywhere.

It's a skill that is particularly helpful if you're in a bar and want to have a good time, or you're at a networking event and want to make a great impression on the people there, or you're at a friend's party and you want people to say "Who is that guy or girl? They were just the most fun. They were the life of the party." Being the person that is that social connector or being the person that does bring people together really does set you apart from most other people, so I feel that it's a very worthy skill to have.

To jump right into it, the first thing that I like to talk about when talking about how to talk to strangers, which is really the lynchpin of it all- if I had to say the secret behind talking to strangers- it's a little concept we like to call social momentum.

Social Momentum

Social momentum basically says that the sooner you try to talk to people and the more you do, the easier it is and the longer you wait to try to talk to someone, the more difficult it is, and the more awkward you're going to be when you eventually do. The perfect example I use is myself. If I'm in a social situation like a party or social event of some sort and it's been forty-five minutes and I haven't talked to anyone and I haven't pushed myself to get outside of my comfort zone and talk to strangers, I might as well just go home because it's going to be damn near impossible for me to get comfortable enough to give a good impression because I'm so nervous, anxious, and awkward when I go do it.

The first thing about talking to strangers is for no other reason than to just get your social momentum going and to get yourself loosened up, I'm going to just try to talk to people as soon as possible. I'm going to try to force myself- for no other reason whatsoever- to say words in the direction of a complete stranger for my own selfish desire to get myself loosened up. Of course, you're going to be providing a good time for them as long as they're interested in socializing at the very least, which most people are.

Throwing Words

There are a couple things I do to really focus on this. If this is the nighttime and you're going out at night, a fun way to loosen yourself up a little bit is something I call throwing words. As you're walking down the street- as the name implies- you simply just throw a word in the direction of another human being for no other reason than to try to get their attention or acknowledgement. It's something simple. I've had guys just yell out "bacon" with an attempt to try to get people to look at them. I've had simple ones like "Hey, I hope you guys have a great night tonight" or "Happy Saturday" or "That's a really cool scarf."

Whatever it is, you're just yelling words in the other person's direction and this serves two purposes. It loosens you up in two ways. One, it helps you develop presence, which is vital to getting good responses when you're talking to strangers. The other reason is that a lot of people have this fear that they're bothering someone. "I'm being an imposition. I feel rude to draw attention to myself and I'm going to irritate them in some way." It's attacking that and saying "I am going to be interrupting this person's life and I am going to try to get that attention back on myself." All you need to be successful is just getting eye contact back and getting someone to look in your direction. I've gotten positive responses. I've gotten negative responses. It's an easy drill that is low risk and low reward. It's an easy way to start to get those muscles loosened up.

Say Something, Say it Early

Once I'm going into a venue, whether it is a bar or party, my sole goal is just going to be to talk to someone as soon as possible. I don't care who they are or what they're doing. I'm going to look for people with smiles on their faces. I'm going to usually try to go around a bar area, if there happens to be one at that event. Usually around the bar area is where the most social people are situated. It's just going to be people standing

around anywhere. Without any rhyme, reason, or discrimination whatsoever, I'm looking to talk to the first person I see as soon as possible for no other reason than to get myself loosened up. They might be in a friendly mood or they might not be.

The 60/40 Principle

That's a big thing that I teach, which is especially applicable when talking to strangers. I call it the sixty forty principle. I made those numbers up, but I feel like they're good. The sixty forty principle states that sixty percent of the reaction you get from another person has nothing to do with you whatsoever. It has everything to do with them and how their day is going or what their childhood was like or how their boss treated them that day or how the relationship with their roommate is going or their parents and just had a fight with their mom. The majority of the response you get from another person has nothing to do with you whatsoever.

I'm going to talk to the first person that I see, but it's also in my mind that they might not be in a good mood. They might not feel like talking to a stranger. They might not feel like being very social, but it doesn't have anything to do with me whatsoever. A lot of people tend to take this personally. "I got rejected." You didn't get rejected. You just found out that person is not very social at that point in time. That's all.

Finding Just One Friendly Person

If I don't get a positive response with that first stranger that I talk to, or even the second, third, fourth, or fifth, I'm just going to keep on talking to the next person. With the sixty forty principle, there is still forty percent that is up to me. I'm going to talk about what constitutes that forty percent in just a moment. I'm going to be talking to someone as soon as possible and then I'm going to be doing, what I call finding that one friendly person. It might not be the first, second, third, fourth, or fifth person I talk to, but eventually- and most of the times it definitely is, especially in those social situations- if I talk to enough people, I'll find at least one person who is friendly, who wants to socialize, and who I get along with to a certain degree.

Once I start talking to that one friendly person, that's going to be what gets me warmed up. Throwing words helped me loosen up a little bit. The fact that I'm just trying to talk to people as soon as possible loosened me up a little bit more, but it's really that first friendly person that I find that's really going to get me feeling good and get my social

momentum moving. Maybe I'll do that one or two more times and find one or two more friendly people.

Then I'm off to the races. My social momentum is going and then it's easier for me to talk to anyone. I don't have that anxiety. I can go up to anyone in the room and usually get a good response because I'm feeling good, social, and energetic. We've all had those moments. We've all had those times when we could just talk to anyone. We've all had those times when we felt nervous and felt it was impossible for us to talk to a stranger.

The only difference in those times when things just happen and you were loose and comfortable talking to strangers and it seemed natural; it just so happened that some random circumstances or random series of events got your social momentum going early already. Through force of nature, you happened to just talk to some strangers, which got you loosened up and that made it easier to talk to other strangers. In the times it didn't, it just so happened that life didn't give you those opportunities through sheer coincidence.

Forcing those opportunities and finding that one friendly person and using that conversation to propel your social momentum forward to the point where you can talk to anyone, you can be that social person at that point. That's really the cornerstone. That's really at the heart of talking to strangers. It's that concept of social momentum and how your actions are going to determine which way your night is going to go.

Chris: Okay. You enter a room and just start talking to the first person that you see. You just say something.

Dropping a Hook

Nick: As soon as possible. I'm going to do what I call dropping a hook. I like to call it dropping a hook when I'm talking about talking to strangers, because too many people think of it as this big spiel that I have to do. "I have to go make this big conversation happen. I have to do all of these things to get them to like me. I have to say something funny. I have to be able to carry this conversation so they like me." Once again, when you factor in the sixty forty principle, a person's mood or whether they want to talk or not, has nothing to do with me whatsoever.

Instead of thinking "I've got to go make all of this happen," I like to say that you just drop a hook. You go fishing. You just dangle a hook in front of them and sometimes they're going to bite it and sometimes they're not. If you're a fisherman and the fish aren't biting

that day, they don't say "I'm a crappy fisherman," they just know that all they can do is to drop their hook with their bait down there. Sometimes the fish bite and sometimes they don't. You're not looking to do any more than that. Simply just say anything. Your forty percent does make a difference. There are things you can control, which will determine the responses you get. Give it a chance and see what kind of mood those people are in. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's not, but it's just about finding out the truth in that situation.

Chris: That's brilliant. That makes a lot of sense. Thinking back, I've definitely found that to be the case for myself. If I'm in a social situation, the first person is the hardest one to talk to. After that, you just bounce around to the next person.

The Talking to Strangers Hump

Nick: We've all got a hump. I like to call it the talking to strangers hump. We all have to get over it if we want to have fun in a social situation. We have to shove ourselves. "I don't feel like talking. I feel awkward." It's just like you don't feel like going to the gym, but you force yourself to do it, and on the other side of it, you feel great. It's the same thing. You've got this hill and sometimes it's a little taller, while other times, it's a little shorter. You have to shove yourself over that hill, and once you do, you can worry about some other stuff. Talking to strangers is all about getting yourself over that talking to strangers hump.

Chris: Okay. Say something and say something early. What next?

The Three Things That Get People to Respond Well

Nick: With the sixty forty principle in mind, there is still forty percent that is up to you. That's a huge chunk. I've found that when your forty percent is on, you're going to get a majority of positive responses. When your forty percent is off, you're going to get a majority of negative responses. What are those things that you can control? What is that forty percent?

There are really only three things that you can control that make any difference in a conversation. The most surprising thing to most guys is that what you're actually saying is not it whatsoever. The words coming out of your mouth has nothing to do with the response you get from strangers in the first five or ten seconds. Once you get into a

conversation, you have to listen and respond appropriately, but in that first five to ten seconds the words that are coming out of your mouth make no difference in the response you get whatsoever. There are only three things that make a difference. What are those things?

Eye Contact

The first thing that makes a difference is eye contact. I'm always going to go back to eye contact because it's the most powerful social force in the world. If you're coming up and making strong eye contact- the kind that demands respect... If someone is looking at you and then look away and you feel awkward like you shouldn't have looked away and then look back because you feel like it was rude for you to look away- that's the kind of eye contact that demands and expects respect. I'm going to look at someone until they stop their conversation and look at me if there's another conversation going on. Making strong, dominant, and respect-demanding eye contact is first.

If you walk up and you're looking all over the place, most people are going to brush you off like a fly. If you walk up and look at someone as if you expect their attention, they're going to give it to you. Eye contact is the most important. It will either give you positive responses or negative responses when you approach strangers.

Facial Expression

The second is also equally important and it's the expression on your face. When you're starting a conversation with strangers in that first five to ten seconds, there's really only one expression on your face that makes a difference. That expression is simply "everything is okay." Everything is fine. We're all having a good time. There's nothing to worry about. Everything is great. I feel very comfortable. I feel very solid right now.

Why is this so important? This is so important because when you go to talk to another person, nine times out of ten, that person is going to be looking for you to let them know if this is okay or not. They're going to be looking at you. "Is this cool, or is this not cool?" If they look at you and you've got a look on your face that says "This is not okay. I'm nervous. This is uncomfortable. This is weird," this person is going to think it's not okay. That it's weird and not good and that they need to get the hell away from this situation as soon as possible because this is making me uncomfortable.

If you've got that expression on your face that "This is alright. Everything is fine. This is comfortable. Yeah, I know when two strangers are talking to each other, things are a little weird, but everything is alright," then they're going to take that lead as well. They're going to say "Okay. This is alright. This is fine. Everything is okay." It is ultimately important what your face is telling the other person about that situation.

Presence

The third is more general, but it really does encompass the first two. The third one is presence. You can say that eye contact has to do with your presence because it does. You can absolutely say that the expression on your face has to do with presence. I like to highlight those two because they're the most important. Overall though, it's your presence.

Distance

There are two major factors aside from eye contact and facial expression that have to do with presence. They are how close are you getting to the other people? Are you keeping a distance of a foot away? That's the corporate distance as I like to call it. Or are you getting nice and close and comfortable like you would with friends, like you're standing around people you're comfortable with? That's your physical proximity.

Vocal Volume

Number two is the volume of your voice. I like to say that when you get nervous you start taking more shallow breaths. When you start taking more shallow breaths, your voice gets softer and weaker. They're going to hear the nervous and insecurity in your voice and tend to brush you away and not listen to what you're saying that much more.

If you take a deep breath and you're not even trying to yell or speak any more loudly, but since my lungs are now simply more full of air, my voice now has more depth, volume, and resonance to it. People are going to be more drawn to it and respect what I'm saying that much more.

It's really those three things: eye contact, the expression on your face, and your altogether presence. Those are the only three things that matter when you start a conversation. An example of why that works is that the things that I say more than anything else to start a conversation with a stranger is simply "Hey. How's it going?" Get their attention with "Hey," and then make that eye contact and say "How's it going? How are you guys doing? What's happening?" That's it.

I don't need a funny line. I don't need something charming. I don't need something witty. It's simply just saying "Hey," with my presence and my eye contact. "I want to socialize right now. I want to know how you guys are doing. Are you interested in socializing with me?" If you do those three things, you're going to get positive responses most of the time with the sixty forty principle applying. If you don't do those three things, you're going to get negative responses most of the time.

Chris: That makes a lot of sense. When I look back to times where I've met strangers, I never remember the first thing that they said to me. It's like I'm suddenly just talking to this person and either you feel comfortable around them, or you don't. This is great. For someone who that doesn't come naturally to and they're just a nervous person in general, is it just practice? Should they just think about those things and keep trying to do it?

Building the Muscle

Nick: It's a muscle. It's taken me a while to develop this muscle. I still have a really tough time talking to strangers if I don't go through these motions and don't force myself to do it. I've worked with guys who are the most shy, socially awkward, and have the most social anxiety. When we first did it, it was like they were climbing up Mount Everest. As long as they keep putting in the work and keep going out and practicing this skill and working out this muscle, it's that much easier.

Now they can do it with no problem. It really is a muscle like anything else. If you work it out, it's going to get stronger and it's going to be that much easier to do it. If you don't do it, it's going to atrophy and it's going to get weaker and it's going to be more difficult for you to do it like with anything else. There are some people with more of a natural propensity based on their upbringing and nature versus nurture. There are some people that don't have as much, but everyone has the ability to do so. I've never met anyone who didn't.

Chris: People vary obviously, but is there a recommended regimen if someone wanted to develop this? Would you tell them to go to a bar at least twice a week?

Practice

Nick: I recommend once a week. There are two things I recommend when I'm done working with someone. One is that they should go out once a week to work on this stuff at the very least. It can be any type of social situation just to get those social muscles working by talking to strangers and socializing with other people.

I also recommend just changing the way you live your life. I always like to say that this isn't a weekend program that I like to run. It's a lifetime program. There's a person behind the counter at the gas station, so you ask them how things are going, and not just going through this robotic exchange that we usually have, but really caring and giving them a smile and a look in the eye and making that human connection with them.

When you're sitting at the bus stop and there is an old lady sitting next to you, just drop the hook and make a small random comment. She'll probably want to chit chat for a little bit. There are very few old ladies who don't. When you're in line at Starbucks and there is a guy standing in front of you looking at a cupcake, you can say "Yeah, I know. I checked out those cupcakes. They look pretty good." It's getting yourself used to it and making that real change in your life and making it more of a day to day thing. It's not a special skill that you can just pull out and press a button, but it's more about the way you live your life.

Chris: This is excellent. Anything else?

The View from the Other Side

Nick: There's one final thing I'll say, and I've been saying this more and more lately because I think it's so fascinating. My goal in life is to break down the barriers that men and women have between each other that we've erected. This bit of advice is directed specifically toward single men out there who may be interested in talking to that pretty girl at the bar, but might be nervous and not know what to do.

Whenever I tell women what I do, one of the most common responses I get is "Guys need this? What do guys need help with?" It blows their mind that men actually need

help with talking to them and especially talking to strangers at the bar. In a girl's point of view, we have it so easy. They cannot believe that we're the ones complaining about how hard it is to talk to girls at a bar. They say "All you have to do is just come up to us and say hi. Sometimes we're going to be in a good mood and sometimes we're not, but why are you afraid to just come up and say hi?"

It blows their freaking minds that guys stress out about this so much. They think it's so much harder to be a girl. You have to sit there and wait for a guy to approach you. "How the hell do I get a guy to approach me? Do I have to wear this or smile pretty or make more eye contact? I wore my sexiest dress and looked right at that guy and he still wouldn't come up and say hi to me. What the hell do I have to do to get a guy to approach me?"

Girls feel- and they're right- that guys have it so much easier because guys get to actually make the choice of if they want to talk to her, or if they want to talk to her. It blows their mind that guys stress or don't understand just talking to a random girl. To girls, it's the most mind boggling thing. They can't comprehend why guys stress about this stuff and why guys have any trouble with it.

Chris: For me, I can remember it being like you try to talk to someone and start a conversation and that person isn't feeling very social that night, or they'd rather talk to someone else, it's just devastating and crushing and it's hard.

Nick: Guys can march into battle with bullets whizzing past their head with a risk of death and they feel more comfortable. I've worked with Marines who have been in battle situations. They can jump out of airplanes and run through explosions and they're fine, but for some reason a girl not being interested in talking to them is enough to scare them away. Not even that they're not interested in talking to them, but that a girl's just not in a social mood scares them and is enough for them not to go up and say hi in the first place. Women don't understand it. Quite honestly they don't have respect for guys like that. "What's so scary?" They can't figure it out and I can't help but to kind of agree with them, too. We really do have the power, but we've just forgotten it. One of the things I tell the guys I work with is that any girl would trade places with you in a heartbeat.

Chris: On that note, thank you so much, Nick, for leading this course. This has been how to start conversations with strangers. This is Lifehacks.com. If you want to get in touch with Nick and get some coaching from him, you can find him at sparksofattraction.com. Once again, Nick, thank you very much.

Nick: It's been my pleasure. Thank you, Chris.