

Small talk is the key

We attend business events to build new or build on existing relationships. Too many people seem to think it has to be business talk at these gatherings – far from it. It is the small talk which is the foundation of any relationship and from experience I believe the actual percentage of business talk which takes place is invariably less than one-third. To ensure you never run out of small talk again try this.

What to talk about

I hope this will help you remember. Next time you are out there networking and a pregnant pause occurs, maybe you can use the following bit of fun to help you jump-start or rekindle the conversation. This 12-second exercise could change your life.

I would like you to concentrate hard on the next few lines, you'll see why in a moment.

Imagine you drive home and get out of your car. You are then, looking across the road at your neighbour's house. Got the picture in your mind? Look up at the neighbour's house and imagine, balanced on the roof is an enormous gold business card. Flying through the centre of the business card is a small blue aeroplane, it doesn't have propellers, it has Slazenger tennis racquets. You look in the cockpit and you see the pilot reading today's Times newspaper next to the pilot and, behind, in the passengers' seats, you see your neighbour's family.



There's a pictorial image of the story



What I have just explained is a picture-stack. Virtually everything we remember is done through pictures. After all, what is our imagination, but pictures in our minds? Now I will explain what it all means. There are key symbols in your picture for use in a conversation.

The Car

This is your symbol for an ice breaker, “Where have you come from?” The answer could be a geographical answer or a company answer. We all have interesting stories to tell about travel!

The House

The house is a symbol for asking questions like, where do you live? Where do you come from? Have you travelled far? Do you live in the city, or in the country? Tell me about the area you grew up in. I often use accents as a conversation setter. I live in Manchester so if I meet people with a London or Scottish accent I'll say, 'You're not from round here'.

The gold business card

This is to remind you to ask questions about what people do. What profession are you in? Where do you work? Who do you work for? How long have you been there? What position do you hold in the company? At the end of the day, what are we there for? We're there to make more contacts and eventually do more business. Without asking directly, you often want to know how big their business is. It's very unlikely you are going to say: “So, what's the turnover of your business?” which would give you an immediate indication of its size, but try this: “So, John, how many people do you work with?” or “How many people are there in your office?” Knowing the answer to that gives you a good indication whether they are a small, medium or large business. It's for you then to decide whether or not this is just going to be a social chat or whether the person you're talking to is within your target market.

At this juncture, I feel I must stress that even I, King of the Networkers (!), don't look for a business opportunity with everyone I meet. Because of what I do, I am meeting hundreds of people regularly and, of course, a large percentage of them aren't my target market. Once I've found out what they do, and it doesn't fit, small talk is the order of the day. But do remember this, 'everyone is somebody's somebody and you never know who they know!'

The blue aeroplane

What do people use aeroplanes for? Travel and holidays, of course. Are you going away this year? Where did you go last year? Have you ever been to America? Do you like flying? Does your business involve a lot of travelling? (A bit of a mix here between the business card and the aeroplane.) Not, as one joker suggested at a presentation, are you taking flying lessons?

The purple tennis racquets



Yes, that's right, interests, sports and hobbies. What football team do you support? What do you do outside work? Do you really enjoy bell ringing? You are how old and you still play rugby?!

Today's newspaper

Needless to say, this represents current events. What did you think about the financial chaos at the moment? Do you think the government is ever going to legalise cannabis? What role do you see the monarchy having in the next twenty or thirty years?

If you know you are going to an event, do ensure that you listen to or read the news just beforehand. You'd hate to get caught out if a major incident took place and you knew nothing about it. I don't know whether this is true, but this came over the Internet recently, supposedly from a newspaper:

The neighbour's family

This is self-evident, but here's a word of warning. It's generally not good to talk about family very early in the building of relationships. When people don't have children, or someone has just separated or divorced, the last thing they will want to talk about is that particular aspect of their life. Never directly ask, "are you married?" or "Do you have children?"

In summary

People love talking about themselves; good networkers let them. The most interesting people we ever meet are those most interested in us.

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