



Give good conversation. Tips for elevating small talk (and maybe easing into business!)

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Versions printed in RainToday; PSMJ's AE Marketing Journal
and Modern Steel Construction

Many technical (and non!) folks in the AEC industry are not keen on 'small talk'. We find ourselves feeling inauthentic, facing dead-end conversations, or wasting our time. As a result, given the choice, most---but certainly not all---of us prefer to quickly move away from 'small talk' and towards more meaningful topics that challenge our intellect or feed our soul. That said, it's not a requirement for small talk to be shallow!

Why does good conversation (yes, even small talk) really matter?

Perhaps you're thinking: *"I need to focus on skills that will truly affect the bottom line: selling."* No question, sales skills are invaluable! But I assure you that even professionals that are versed at the various selling steps---identifying and creating need, probing for prospect issues, clearly explaining value propositions, and going for the 'ask'---are not necessarily masters of conversation and (gasp!) small talk. I know this for a fact; clients have repeatedly asked for guidance on becoming better conversationalists.

Because small talk is actually expected (at varying degrees---depending upon culture and context), this article demonstrates ways that you can guide your conversation from typical small talk topics into conversations with some depth. You'll also find examples on how to subtly sway the dialogue towards business on a macro (not micro, where you are specifically peddling your services) level.

WEATHER:

The usual: What a crazy storm last night! Did you catch that glorious light show from wherever you were?

Elevated: Wow, this is the worst draught in over 50 years! What are your thoughts on why? Global warming? El Nino? **Or:** Isn't it interesting that while some industries have suffered greatly from this draught, others have boomed such as fruit farmers, water utilities, and crop irrigation systems. **Or:** What's your position on environmental issues and their connection to weather (i.e. spending priorities; your local impact; alternative energy; etc.)?

Business segue: How has the weather impacted your business and your clients' businesses? **Or:** What adjustments have you made, if any, to your overall business strategy as it relates to this dramatic weather?

SPORTS:

The usual: Did you catch the Olympic swimming finals last night?

Elevated: What did you think of the dynamic between the German and Greek athletes considering their current economic strain? **Or:** How do you find the hosting of this year's Olympics? Did you have an opinion on which City should have won the next summer games?

Business segue: How might your company use lessons and analogies from sport scenarios and apply them towards your business strategies and behaviors?

FAMILY:

The usual: You mentioned earlier that you needed to call your babysitter. Tell me about your kids.

Elevated: While I'm not a parent myself, I've learned a lot about nurturing from my two wonderful pets. In what ways have you discovered your highest sense of nurturing as a parent? **Or:** I have heard many times that parents learn as much from their children as vice versa. What is something significant that your children have taught you? **Or:** If you could take any vacation with your children, sparing no expense and with no schedule restrictions, what would it be?

Business segue: I so admire professionals that successfully manage their career while maintaining their deep commitment to family. It must be tricky! What is your secret to striking the balance? How has your company supported your parenting responsibilities?

TRAFFIC OR PARKING:

The usual: How was your commute on the way to this event? Where did you park?

Elevated: I've got a friend that drives a Vespa everywhere. In our built environment industry, I feel a special obligation to find creative ways to take public transportation and carpool. How about you?

Business segue: What's your company's policy on commuting to work? What suggestions might you offer to them to make commuting easier on staff? Would the nature of your firm's business ever lend itself to telecommuting?

TRAVEL:

The usual: Any upcoming trips planned, for pleasure or business?

Elevated: What do you look for in a vacation? Adventure? Athleticism? Culture? Altruistic opportunities? I adore travel, and would love to learn about your experiences. **Or:** What do you find to be the most rewarding part of an international travel experience? **Or:** I know some Spanish, and I'm learning German now. How are you with languages, and how have they affected your travel experiences?

Business segue: Tell me more about the conference that you'll be attending in Hawaii. Will you be a speaker? What are you most looking forward to learning? **Or:** How does vacation time work at your firm? Do they encourage it? Studies have shown that taking regular vacations (much like taking a lunch break!) actually increases employee longevity and job satisfaction.

HOT NEWS TOPICS:

Select any current news topics, especially if you can think of some where you might be able to share a personal tidbit about yourself, or where you think the other person might be interested based upon whatever clues they may offer about themselves. Feel free to openly share your favorite news sources (this is another way to create a connection). Personally, I turn to NPR (National Public Radio); my customized RSS feed; LinkedIn recommended articles; and CNN. Here's a 'hot topic' example: Education.

The usual: What's your alma mater? (Despite the fact that this is a common question, it's still welcomed!)

Elevated: When I went to graduate school, I had to take out student loans. Are you familiar with the Student Loan Forgiveness Act of 2012? If approved, this bill will keep student loan interest rates at 3.4% indefinitely. What do you feel are the pros and cons? **Or:** Tell me, do you do any teaching yourself? **Or:** Perhaps you've considered being a guest lecturer? I've found that it's such a fantastic way to contribute to our future leaders.

Segue to business: Have you kept tabs on the higher education programs in your specific discipline? What are the required core classes? What are the ratios of men versus women? How has it changed since you were in school? **Or:** Does your company offer reimbursement for continuing education? What results have you seen from staff that leveraged additional education opportunities?

BUSINESS:

Often, you'll find yourself in settings where work is not the expected topic---dinner parties; weddings; non-profit engagements; cultural events; sporting games; etc. Even so, perhaps you'd like to subtly create a rapport around business. Here are a few of my favorites that I use to spark conversation around work.

1. *What made you decide to work at (or create!) your company? Then: Isn't it wonderful how our life paths ebb and flow...taking us to places we may never have thought were possible? Just think, when you were working towards your undergraduate degree, did you envision yourself leading a 500-person international environmental engineering firm? Another example: I met a labor lawyer last week. My small talk included: I've met a lot of lawyers, but never one that focused on labor rights. I'm intrigued; it takes a special person to be in that role. Tell me, was this something you always wanted to focus on, or do you have a 'story' behind why you became a labor lawyer?*
2. *What's next for you- it seems so many people reach a point in their career where they 'reinvent'. What about you?*
3. *What motivates you most at work?*
4. *When have you been lucky in business? Or: Tell me about a turning point in your career.*

If you are truly committed to becoming a great conversationalist, then you must consider these **Do's** and **Dont's**.

DO:

- **Remember that being interesting is good; being interested is even better.** Being a terrific listener, even if the topic is not of immediate interest to you, is absolutely essential. Tap into your 'curious self', not unlike how you might have been as a child!
- **Share!** Equally important, you absolutely must share about yourself. Offer up little tidbits within your comments and questions that reveal something about you. See if they bite and show you that they are interested. When done right, sharing can demonstrate vulnerability and humility, which in turn can lead to connection and trust.
- **Encourage flow.** You mustn't bombard others with question-after-unrelated-question. Instead, you must build upon whatever the other people have said, and make sure that any changes of topic are elegant rather than abrupt or awkward.
- **'Be' the host.** Even if you are not officially the host, make it your business to ensure that everyone is having a good time, and that they feel included.
- **Be a bit playful.** Be willing to laugh at yourself, and take appropriate opportunities to reflect your lighthearted side of self: I see you have a smart phone...wanna swap favorite app recommendations? OR: So you had a tricky time tearing yourself away from the office, eh? If only we could have an extra hour every day! If we had one, I know that I'd do xyz. What would you do with an extra hour per day? OR: Lately, I've been learning a new fun fact every week relating to

science. Today, I learned a super cool finding around blood types on NPR's Science Friday. Care to learn more?

- **Goal #1: create warmth.** Good conversation is not just enlightening, exciting, and invigorating. When you focus on a positive exchange, it will create warmth between people. And warmth can lead to trust --- in business and beyond.

DON'T:

- **Belittle, brag, exclude, or make others feel inadequate.** If you ask an 'elevated' question or offer up personal information only to discover that the other person has limited experiences, a different education level, or a lack of knowledge on the specific topic, then subtly shift gears to something of which they are more versed. Monitor their non-verbal cues as an indicator on their level of comfort, openness and engagement.
- **Talk on and on, completely self-absorbed.** If possible, guide the conversation to be 1/3 you, 2/3 them. Remember, being *interested* outperforms interesting.
- **Provoke a debate.** Remember that 'conversationalist' does not equate to 'debater'. Perhaps you personally consider healthy debating on heady topics to be a dynamic method towards building connections and elevating the quality of discourse. But others may not share your passion for true debate. Until you get a real sense of their interest level in debating challenging---and likely controversial---topics, steer clear and focus on creating a warm and pleasant experience.

Taboo or not taboo? I do not intend to insult my readers' professionalism. You already know to avoid jokes-in-poor-taste; gossip or negative commentary about other people or companies; and boundary crossing (personal health, and other private matters that are best shared between trusted friends and colleagues). I do think---when approached with a genuine open-minded interest--- good conversationalists can explore otherwise 'taboo' topics such as politics, religious practices, lifestyle choices and money. That said, one should tread very carefully; be ready to adjust; and only step into this route if it's within a logical context and sequence. As an example, when a holiday such as Rosh Hoshanna (the Jewish New Year) approaches, I delight in learning more about their traditions and how they compare to other high holidays.

A mention on 'elevator' speeches. Many of us have become accustomed to adjusting our elevator speech 'version' depending upon with whom we are speaking. Adjusting is effective! If you are laboring over creating the perfect, high impact elevator speech, then remember there's this easy twist: Offer a one-liner of what your firm does, followed by: *A typical client might look like xyz...* **Or:** *Here's what you might hear from a perspective client of ours. Then cite the problem or goal that you help clients to solve/attain.* You can then turn it back to them, and either ask about their company, or ask: *And what might I hear from a perspective client that should make me think of your services?* This may even spark a specific anecdote from the other person as to how their firm has helped a client in the past. It's a wonderful launching point to get to know them deeper. *What is your process? Is that your favorite type of assignment? If not, what is? How did that client find you?* These are all questions that can make for interesting conversation as you ease into their business strategies and approach.

So how do you learn to 'give good conversation?' In addition to identifying and modeling your behavior around 'experts', why not give role-playing a shot? With your co-workers or with a consultant, establish mock scenarios where you describe the contact; their role; the environment, and perhaps whether or not there is a business opportunity (stage of buying process; stage of project; etc). At first, many of us (me included!) dread role-playing. Yet once we step into a 'role' and realize that we are not being judged---but instead we are experimenting within the safety of mock encounters---then it becomes an invaluable tool for collaborative learning and solidifying good habits.

Best of luck in your efforts to 'give good conversation'.