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Mastering Art of Small Talk Can Reap Big Rewards

By Kelly Kendall
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Tossing off sparkling dialogue to strangers can challenge even the most eloquent of us. But the social and occupational rewards for the person who can shoot the breeze are rich: The friends. The job. The dates. The extra whipped cream on the mocha.

"If you can't small talk, you can't succeed in life, and you will never get a date," says David Wygant, a Seattle-based "dating agent" who charges clients \$10,000 to coach them on how to improve their social skills in meeting new people.

Wygant says small talk is an important skill that's usually overlooked -- people want a date or a job, but don't want to have to make conversation first.

Yet filling dead air is an instinct. Why can otherwise innocuous silences on a date or an interview feel so excruciating?

"We have this incredible language ability, knowing an average of 60,000 words by the time we reach adulthood," says Dr. James Houran, a clinical psychologist based in Irving, Texas, who is also director of psychological studies at the dating service True.com. "We don't like silence."

So how do you avoid it when you sit across the table from somebody, staring at the walls and listening to pins drop?

The art of small talk is twofold, says Wygant: observation and listening. Your time is best spent not searching for some suave line to use, but really focusing on the person in front of you.

"When you relax, all the good things come to you," he says. "Otherwise, you're trying to think of the magic words to say, and five minutes later, you think, 'Oh, I could have asked him about his watch, or his Northwestern sweat shirt -- my cousin went there.' "

Listening -- really listening -- is also an irresistible move, even though the instinct to turn the attention back to ourselves is strong.

So when someone you're talking to mentions he just got back from Spain, resist the urge to volley back with a tale of your own travel experiences. Instead of focusing on what you're going to say next, focus on the person in front of you.

"Then respond in a way that shows you've heard what they've said, asking open-ended questions," says Julie Searles of Life Designs Coaching in Indianapolis.

Ask why the guy was there, what his favorite city was, where he'd like to go next.

Turning your attention to the other person makes compliments better, too, though even these tend to be a little self-centric.

As Searles observes, we'll usually say something like, "I like your tie" instead of, "You have a great way of putting colors together."

"Making a 'you' statement rather than an 'I' statement feels more personal," Searles says.

Practicing your speaking skills informally among friends and in other settings pays off, too, say great conversationalists. Making a conscious effort to chat with co-workers can help you get more comfortable with that kind of interaction.

To some people, though, small talk seems like a waste of time.

Houran finds that people in high-pressure jobs in particular may see small talk as a distraction.

"Most people find small talk difficult when they have no beneficial motive to engage in it," says Houran.

But he identifies three reasons, conscious or not, that we chat each other up:

To network, both socially and in the business world.

To influence others. For instance, to convince a prospective employer that you're perfect for a job, or a prospective date that you're the man she's been waiting for all her life.

To build alliances. This would be in the Machiavellian sense of trying to align yourself with people in positions of power and sniff out alliances already existing among others (this is where office gossip comes in).