



How to become a better conversationalist.

The secret of small talk in love and everyday life - and for brands

Reading time 12 minutes

A recent [post](#) by psychologist Rob Henderson caught my attention. He confirmed my perception that many people, especially younger people, are not very good at small talk. And that most people underestimate the fundamental importance of small talk. And not only people, but also brands underestimate the lively salience-boosting small talk with their target group. In the following, I show the most important insights for **more** small talk and in the second, slightly more detailed part, I list Henderson's best tips for more relaxed small talk. So the professionals among us are welcome to just scan the second part.

Henderson first wakes us up to the fear you have to deal with when you have to walk into a room full of strangers and think you have nothing to say. We've probably all had that feeling at one time or another. For experienced small talkers, this is no longer a problem.



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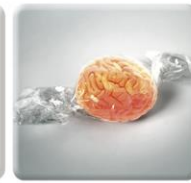
Recently, Henderson attended a matchmaking event as a friend of the organisers. The turnout was excellent and several participants exchanged phone numbers. He quickly noticed that young people are not as practised at having good conversations. Maybe it's the social media or the after-effects of contact restrictions?

What would these participants need to learn? First of all, you should know that most conversations are not about exchanging information. Most of the time, especially at the beginning of getting to know someone, a conversation consists of small talk and idle chit-chat. This is used to implicitly assess the friendliness and trustworthiness of others.

This idea was developed by evolution psychologist Robin Dunbar. He noted that mutual grooming among apes is not primarily about hygiene, but rather about forming relationships and strengthening bonds. Dunbar argued that small talk is the equivalent of grooming behaviour for humans. That is, much of our conversation is not just about exchanging concrete information (although it often happens), but also about building and maintaining social relationships.

Many intelligent young people think that small talk is a waste of time. I used to think that way myself. All the "How are you?" and the chit-chat about the weather and sports. It just seemed pointless and too superficial.

In reality, most conversations are neither deep nor thoughtful or complex. If you want to connect with people, it is helpful to master the basics of everyday conversation.



Small talk - the kind of conversation that takes place between two people who don't know each other - is one of the most important conversations (!) we have. Stanford Graduate School of Business professor Thomas Harrell studied what predicts graduate school success. He and his team found that grade point average is not a predictor of future success. The characteristic that the school's most successful graduates had in common was **eloquence**. Those who had started a business and climbed the corporate ladder were the ones who could talk to anyone in any situation.

In all contexts - social, professional, romantic - you can have the same goal: start a conversation, keep it going, build a bond and leave the other person thinking, "I like this person."

We think too pessimistically:

It is easier to achieve this goal than many think. Research has shown that after social interactions, people systematically underestimate how much their conversation partners like them and enjoy their company. Researchers concluded: "Conversation appears to be an area where people display uncharacteristic pessimism about their performance". Don't let this hold you back.

When I recently read an [interview](#) with Ian McGilchrist, who researches the extremely different functions of the two hemispheres of the brain, I had an aha moment. McGilchrist argues that the right hemisphere is central to our understanding of the world, that this is where our intuitive knowledge of how things relate to each other, especially how they relate to each other in context, is stored.

So it's not just 'emotions'. Our social relationships play the central role in this and thus successful small talk should satisfy the needs of the right hemisphere of the brain.



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Part 2: Tips for better small talk

Small talk can be learned. In her book "Talk: The Science of Conversation", social psychologist Elizabeth Stokoe gives many useful tips on communication. One point from the book: "Good conversation is made up of questions; if you haven't asked one within two minutes of speaking, stop yourself and get a grip."

Many people understand this intuitively. The best conversationalists I have ever met are excellent at asking questions. Even stupid or naïve questions. Talented interlocutors ask stupid questions just to have a topic of conversation. Don't push it too far or the conversation will turn into an interview. This often happens at speed dating events. They sound like fun, but they are often very boring. The reason: they turn into interviews. People ask each other the same questions. Where are you from, what do you do, how long have you lived here, and so on. Good conversations are not interviews.



Throw out conversational lures:

Asking questions is good. But also skilfully arousing the other person's interest. In other words, you should make it easy for people to ask you questions. Use conversation bait. Some examples, along with the question you might want to elicit:

"Where I lived before..." (Where did you live before?)

"When I lived in Australia..." (Where in Australia? Why did you live there?)

"In this book I am reading..."
(Which book?)

"After training, I usually do..." (Training - for what?)

The main point here is to encourage your conversation partner to become active.

Fortunately, almost everyone has at least a few interesting or semi-interesting things to talk about. Cooking, travelling, sports, books you read, languages you learn, essays you write, projects you develop, things you fix, events you attend and so on. If you spend most of your life scrolling through social media, you will be a boring person. So don't do that.

The point of small talk and idle chatter is to make the other person feel good.

Ask questions until you find common ground and then delve into that topic. If the conversation gets bogged down, it is okay to ask other questions or put out other conversation bait.

Avoid sad stories and leave out jokes. Humour varies from person to person. Becoming a good conversationalist requires repetition in practice. Practise through regular social interaction. Don't use the self service checkout in the shop. Don't be afraid to make a little small talk with baristas, waitresses and gym staff. This doesn't mean you talk their ears off and hold up the line. It just means you say, "Hey, how are you".

When your taxi driver asks you how your day went, don't brush her off with a "fine" and mount the earphones. You can even tell her a little about what you are up to that day or ask if she had a busy day herself.

There is empirical evidence that people feel more authentic when they behave in an extraverted way, even if they describe themselves as introverted. People feel most authentic when they behave in ways that other people find attractive.



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Henderson talks to taxi drivers. And asks smart questions: how many passengers they have on a typical day, their record for the most orders in a day and the furthest they have ever driven for an order. I'm usually taciturn with taxi drivers myself, except in Berlin, the taxi drivers there ignore any monosyllabicity. I will try Henderson's questions.

Conversations are like any other skill.

You have to practise.

It's like physical fitness. The more you work at it, the better you get.

Just about anyone, regardless of personality, temperament, cognitive ability, etc., can improve their conversational skills. If you need to work on your laptop, don't hole up in your flat all day. I myself have written some chapters of my books in cafes. If two gyms are equidistant from your house and you are single, it might be wiser to join the gym that is near a café or a grocery shop.

Relationships benefit from small talk

But small talk and idle chatter are not only important for getting to know each other. It can also be important for maintaining a relationship. The feelings of intimacy in a relationship often wane. Many men think that communication is only for conveying information. But conversation, even if it's not about anything important, helps maintain the relationship and reassures the romantic partner.



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Henderson himself only realised this after years. And then stopped blocking questions about his day. So he went through the day, explaining to her how he woke up, squeezed toothpaste on his Oral-B (as a rule, specificity is funnier than generalities), flipped the switch on his coffee machine, and so on. And then he asked her the same question. A little chit-chat, light banter, casual conversation with no clear goal in mind. The kit for good relations.

Some more tips

A recent study found that people rate their conversation partners better when they smile, nod a lot and speak with greater intensity. Monotony is poison for the small talk effect.

If you are really shy, you can adopt the behaviour or personality of a socially confident role model. This extraverted role model could be a friend, a coach, an actor, an influencer, a podcaster, a colleague, and so on. If you are shy (which is often due to an inner feeling that you are not worthy of participating in a conversation), act like someone else. Your bad copy of that person is better than being a wallflower and avoiding social contact. In a social situation where you feel nervous or shy, ask yourself what your extraverted role model would do and do that.



So those are some of Henderson's tips on how to be a better conversationalist. There are many more in the [original article](#).

To sum up briefly:

1. Most getting-to-know-you conversations are about social harmony, good vibes and subconsciously assessing whether a person is friendly and trustworthy.
2. Ask questions and make it easy for the person you are talking to to ask you questions. The more interesting your life is, the easier it is for others to ask you questions.
3. If you can't get out of your own head, try to embody an extraverted person you admire. It is better to play a worse version of her than to appear a wallflower or a loner.

Practice. In order to have a good conversation with a particular person, you first need to familiarise yourself with small talk in general. Talk more to the people around you.

Small talk at brands:

I mentioned at the beginning that brands also seem to value small talk less and prefer to convince us intellectually with information. About the sustainability initiatives, the social commitment to currently popular topics, perhaps the Pride attitude or the better CO₂ balance. These are all important topics. But in the prevailing tsunami of information, our bond with the brand would probably be helped more if the brand simply confirmed to us again and again how well and easily it fits into our contexts of use. And thus, ensuring that the brand is remembered in the purchase situation.

The German discounter Penny has just had to experience this. The short campaign to charge climate-friendly 'True Prices' for some products caused strong irritation among many customers. The action was contrary to the discounter's slogan: "If you want cheap, you have to Penny". A slogan that does not come across as particularly charming either. So, it's better to practise brand small talk with the customers for a fulfilling shopping experience.



Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



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