

The Art of Small Talk

Small talk sets you up for big career success

By Kathleen D. Pagana, RN, PhD

There's nothing small about small talk.

Whether it's an interview, a board meeting, or a local conference, you can use small talk to make a good impression and enhance your career. After all, the ability to connect with others is essential for success. If you know how to use small talk, you'll be able to start conversations and keep them going until you find a common area of interest or until business begins. For example, small talk helps break the ice before an interview, and it makes people feel comfortable until the interview begins.

Note that small talk is not limited to interviews. For example, it's a way to connect with others before starting a meeting, and it's a way to facilitate networking at a conference.

Why is small talk a timely topic? One reason is electronic communication. Although electronic communication has many positives, it's negatively affected some of our

interpersonal skills, weakening our confidence and skill in face-to-face communication. As an example, think of going to a fitness center. Note the number of people with earphones listening to their music. They don't even say "hello" to others. Many parents report their children are shy in face-to-face communication, yet they text message back and forth all day long. Face-to-face communication skills are essential for career success.

Becoming a Good Conversationalist

Using small talk is part of being a good conversationalist. You can prepare for conversation by being well read. Read newspapers, magazines, and books. Read professional journals and newsletters. If you are interviewing for a job, check out the organization's Web site for information that may be discussed during the interview. For example, if a hospital is emphasizing its



Magnet status, make sure you can speak to this topic if it comes up in conversation.

As Voltaire says, “One only speaks badly when one has nothing to say.” Make sure you have something to say. You can lose a job if you don’t. For example, a young woman lost a job because she made no attempt at conversation during several interviews sessions. Her responses were all one-word replies. This may be acceptable in text messaging, but it is not in face-to-face conversation. She did not ask any questions, and she made no attempt to participate in the conversation. Her awkwardness was readily observable. She was uncomfortable and made the interviewers uncomfortable. All of her evaluations were negative, and she was not offered the job. Small talk would have helped her connect with her interviewers, demonstrate interest in others, and fill in embarrassing voids in the conversation.

Listening is just as important as talking. When someone tells you that you are a great conversationalist, it’s often a compliment to your listening skills. A good listener can make a person feel like the most important person in the world.

Safe and Unsafe Topics

Keep in mind there are safe and unsafe topics for conversation. Safe topics include weather, sports, traffic, travel, movies, television shows, and current events. For example, How are you enjoying this hot weather? What was traffic like on your way in? “What’s your favorite sport? Who’s your favorite athlete?”

If your mother told you to avoid discussing religion

and politics, she was right. Stay away from these unsafe topics and change the subject if someone brings them up. For example, say, “I see strengths and weaknesses on both sides of that issue, and we’re not going to solve it today. On another topic, are you planning a vacation this year?” Avoid discussing medical problems, gossip, personal misfortunes, and controversial issues. If people ask you about your children, answer briefly. Don’t monopolize the conversation by talking about all the cute things your kids are doing. People without children may be bored, and those unable to have children may be distressed.

Your Ticket to Confidence

Small talk is a gateway to developing new relationships and for maintaining established relationships. Mastering the art of small talk will make you more confident and professional at work and in social situations.

Kathleen D. Pagana, RN, PhD, is a keynote speaker and author of 21 books. The information in this article is from her newest book, *The Nurse’s Etiquette Advantage: How Professional Etiquette Can Advance Your Nursing Career*. This book was published by Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing and is available at www.nursingknowledge.org/STTI/books. Kathy’s website is www.KathleenPagana.com.

Put Your OAR in the Water

How can you start up or facilitate a conversation with small talk? Try using the acronym OAR.

- **Observe.** Make an observation. (For example, “It looks like this unit has been recently renovated.” “I like the large red ‘RN’ on your name badges. It makes the nurses readily identifiable.”)
- **Ask questions.** (For example, “How will your unit be affected by the hospital renovation?” “How many of your nurses are certified in orthopedics?”)
- **Reveal something about yourself.** (For example, “After working in a large city hospital, I’m looking forward to being part of a community medical center.” “I’ve always wanted to move to this part of the country.”)

Start using the OAR technique today. Use it with family and friends. Use it with your patients in the hospital. Use it while standing in the cafeteria line. Use it in the grocery store and with your mail carrier. Use it when you are networking at your next conference. Use it while waiting for a meeting to begin. Use it after you introduce yourself to someone. Don’t wait for others to initiate a conversation. Be proactive, and take the initiative. You’ll soon find that OAR works in all kinds of settings.