



WORKING ON YOUR SMALL TALK COULD PAY OFF BIG TIME

By Sue-Ella Prodonovich

The common language that unites Australians, Kiwis, British and Americans isn't English; it's a shared love of small talk. [While the subject matter may be different, and the delivery style varies](#), its importance to doing business crosses all these cultures.

Small talk is more than just empty words; it's social currency that builds trust and opens doors and develops business.

Why Small Talk Can Be Difficult

I know many professionals shy away from small talk. Some are too shy or self-conscious. Others see it as irrelevant or even fake. [Some just don't get it at all](#).

And that's not necessarily just because they can't stop thinking of how many six-minute billable increments they're wasting by talking about the weather, their families or the sports results.

Small talk can make us feel uncomfortable, especially if we're naturally introverted or we don't [fit the stereotype](#). This can be made worse when the relationship is new and transactional, and we have our guards up.

Often, we don't know what to say, and we fear putting our foot in it by getting things wrong. This can be made worse in today's society, where there are more sensitivities and less common ground. Do you really want to be seen to be prying into someone's family or personal life or say something that might offend someone's political sensibilities?

The business case for small talk (it's more than just politeness)

But I'm imploring you to cast aside your reservations and work hard on your chat.

After all, small talk isn't just idle chatter; it's a strategic move. That was [the finding of a 2019 research paper](#) from UK-based behavioural economists Bose and Sgroi.

The duo's research drew a direct link between our small talk and the beliefs we form about people. They found small talk helped us piece together a mental model of someone, making it an essential marker for judging their smarts and trustworthiness.



And if that's not enough, their study also showed that incorporating small talk into business interactions actually accelerates decision-making, leading to better outcomes - and potentially more profit - all around.

In their seminal work on negotiation, *'Getting to Yes'* (1983), Roger Fisher and William Ury also note that small talk can be an important tool in disentangling problems and finding common ground. By simply chatting about last weekend's football round or talking about a shared passion for travel, you can discover your interests align in unexpected ways.

This same thing was noted in a Harvard University article that [recounted the example of a diplomat negotiating a high-stakes treaty](#) with representatives of another country. After a week of slow progress, the diplomat bemoaned that he would need to return home on Friday afternoon for an evening at the opera with his wife. Immediately, he forged a connection on two fronts: a shared dislike of opera and a shared interest in keeping spouses happy.

This casual exchange altered the tone of the negotiation. The pace picked up, and the diplomat went home as scheduled on Friday afternoon—with a signed agreement in hand.

But it doesn't always have to be a shared interest. Justine Coupland (2008) argued that small talk was a type of talk through which we acknowledge and mark co-presence (i.e. we're in this together). What was talked about mattered less than the interpersonal significance of simply talking.

HOW TO GET YOUR SMALL TALK RIGHT AS A PROFESSIONAL

If you're worried about the quality of your small talk - or if you don't really do it at all - here are my tips for making it easy.

1. Start the small talk early on

Don't save up your small talk for when you meet someone, whether that's virtually or face to face. Use some of it when you're setting up your meeting or talking to the person beforehand. Try to establish some rapport at this early stage by talking about something other than how busy you are.

2. Remember that small actions count

You don't have to go overboard when you do small talk, especially when the other person wants to get straight into the task at hand. Often, a brief smile, a bit of politeness and a 'great to see you' is all you need to get things going.



3. If you can't think of anything else, just base your small talk on the meeting itself

Re-cap the purpose of the meeting, the process you'll be following in the discussion (e.g. "Here are the points we're covering; do you think we need to include anything else?") and the outcome you hope for. This can at least get everyone talking and looking for common ground.

4. Use it in the pre-or post-amble

You can always use your small talk on the way into a meeting or after it. [Turn off your phone](#) before you arrive at the meeting and talk to the people in reception about the traffic, the harbour view, the weather or whatever, on the way into the meeting or the way out of it. Again, if you can't think of anything else to say on the way out the door, just ask them what they found interesting in the discussion or what they see as the next steps.

5. Tell them the clock is off

Sometimes, it's not you; it's the other person. They clam up and get straight to business because they think you'll be charging them for the small talk you engage in. So make it obvious that the clock is off. Close your laptop or device, and even tell them explicitly that you're not charging them.

6. Stay flexible and open to connecting

Even if your first efforts fall flat, stay open to connecting. Think of the example of the diplomat above. Also, while thinking of some topics of conversation ahead of time may be a good ploy, think of some [that will actually spark conversation rather than stop it](#). And try not to make it too obvious you have pre-rehearsed talking points.

In short...

Like everything in business, the art of small talk is about being authentic without being offensive.

If you'd really like to know how to give your BD efforts a boost, give me a call or get a 45-minute business development consultation through BD45.

References & Related Reading

Sue-Ella's Articles

(2023) [For Better Business Development Turn Off Your Phone](#)

(2023) [Is Business Development More Difficult For Women?](#)

(2022) [How to Do Social Events When You Really Don't Want To](#)



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Sue-Ella is the Principal of [Prodonovich Advisory](#), a business dedicated to helping professional services practices sharpen their business development practices.

She works with professional services firms that focus on positive client relationships, and with individuals who want personal, intelligent support.

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