

What's the Big Deal About Small Talk?

You pull into the parking lot, turn off the engine, and sit for a minute dreading the next two hours. An important client has invited you to an open house in celebration of their new downtown office. You hate these things. You don't know what to say, you don't know anyone except the client, and you always feel like you're trying not to look lost; so you eat and drink more than you should, just to stay occupied. You must attend – that's a given – but you sink deeper into the front seat and agonize over how long you have to stay. Will dropping by for thirty minutes do the trick, or will you insult one of your best clients if you don't stay for the whole event? You search for excuses to get yourself out of there early. You could have someone page you at a specified time with a supposed emergency; perhaps one of the kids has a big game; or maybe you'll just allow your anxiety to carry you right into an illness.

Casual conversation happens at least a dozen times a day – on the way into the office, picking up your daughter from soccer practice, riding the elevator with a colleague, fielding a phone call from your mother-in-law, attending an industry meeting, taking a client to lunch, going to a job interview – the list is endless! Yet for some of us, these demands for small talk don't ever make small talk any easier. If anything, such encounters increase anxiety and cause some people to dread social events, business lunches, and chance encounters with neighbors. Unfortunately, in our preoccupation with our own discomfort, our neighbors, acquaintances, and associates label us distant, cold, and reserved.

Remember Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*? On the morning of his son's wedding, Frank Gibbs, the neighborly physician, confesses to his wife that his chief concern in the early days of their own marriage was how to make small talk with his bride. "I was afraid," he tells her, "we wouldn't have material for conversation more'n'd last us a few weeks." It seems acquiring small talk skills is not exclusively a modern-day quest.

If your conversations evaporate almost as soon as they've begun, or if you're a reluctant participant at social and business get-togethers, you've come to the right place. This book will help you acquire the conversation skills you need to feel confident and poised in any situation. If you practice the simple techniques revealed here, you'll put your conversational demons behind you. You will learn how to:

- Engage any individual in a meaningful dialogue
- Resuscitate a dying conversation
- Transition into new topics
- Feel more at ease at networking events, parties, and receptions
- Develop business friendships
- Step out of a conversation with grace