

business issues

GOOD CONVERSATION

BY ANNE SCARLETT

Tips and techniques toward becoming a better conversationalist.

MANY TECHNICAL (AND NON!) folks in the AEC industry are not keen on “small talk.”

We find ourselves feeling inauthentic, facing dead-end conversations or wasting our time. Yet, personal conversation—including small talk—is expected in business scenarios and beyond.

Is it a necessary evil? A nuisance? A communication to avoid? Certainly not.

Given the choice, most—but certainly not all—of us prefer to quickly move away from small talk and toward more meaningful topics that challenge our intellect or feed our soul. That said, it’s not a requirement for small talk to be shallow!

Why Conversation Matters

Perhaps you’re thinking, “I need to focus on skills that will truly affect the bottom line—like selling.” There’s no question that sales skills are invaluable. But I assure you that even those professionals that are versed at the various selling steps—identifying and creating need, probing for prospect issues, clearly explaining value propositions and going for the “ask”—are not necessarily masters of conversation and (gasp!) small talk. I know this for a fact because existing and past clients have admitted it and have repeatedly asked for help in becoming a better conversationalist.

Because small talk is often expected (in some cultures and contexts more than others), I’ll demonstrate some ways that you can guide your conversation from typical small talk topics into conversations with some depth. I’ve also included some ways to sway the dialogue toward business on a macro level (as opposed to a micro level, where you are specifically peddling your services).

Let’s start with the classic scenario of talking about the weather:



Anne Scarlett is president of Scarlett Consulting, a Chicago-based company specializing in AEC-specific strategic marketing plans, marketing audits and coaching. She is also on the adjunct faculty of Columbia College of Chicago and can be contacted through her website, www.annescarlett.com.

- **The usual:** What a crazy storm last night! Did you catch that glorious light show from wherever you were?
- **Elevated:** Wow, this is the worst drought in over 50 years! What do you think is going on? Global warming? El Niño?
- **Business segue:** How has the weather impacted your business and your clients’ businesses?

It’s very possible that the weather won’t have an effect on someone’s business, but the point is that you’re digging deeper and soliciting their advice and opinions.

How about sports?

- **The usual:** Did you catch the Olympic swimming finals last night?
- **Elevated:** What did you think of the dynamic between the German and Greek athletes, considering their current economic strain? **Or:** How do you think London handled the games? Which city do you think should have won the next Summer Games?
- **Business segue:** Did you learn any business lessons from the Games?

Family is a common topic, and people generally enjoy talking (and sometimes venting) about their family.

- **The usual:** You mentioned earlier that you needed to call your babysitter. How old are your kids?
- **Elevated:** I’ve heard that parents learn as much from their children as vice versa. Do you find that to be true? What’s the funniest lesson your kids have taught you? **Or:** If you could take any vacation with your children, sparing no expense and with no schedule restrictions, where would you go?
- **Business segue:** I’m always amazed with how well people are able to balance work life and family. How do you do it?

Travel is another one. People generally enjoy discussing travel, as it gets them away from their routine. Of course, some people travel quite a bit, but they too enjoy talking about trips.

- **The usual:** Any upcoming trips planned?
- **Elevated:** What do you look for in a vacation? Adventure? Athleticism? Culture? Altruistic opportunities? Relaxation? **Or:** I know some Spanish, and I’m learning German now. Do you know any other languages? Have you been able to use them in your travels?
- **Business segue:** Tell me more about the conference you’ll be attending in Hawaii. Will you be a speaker? **Or:** How does vacation time work at your firm? Do they encourage it? Studies have shown that taking regular vacations (much like taking a lunch break!) actually increases employee longevity and job satisfaction.

Current events provide an endless array of possibilities

for engaging conversation. And if the other person isn't as up on the news as you are (or vice versa), this offers a great educational opportunity for one or both of you. Select any current news topics, especially if you can think of some where you might be able to share a personal tidbit about yourself, or where you think that person might be interested, based upon whatever clues they may offer about themselves. That said, use your judgment when approaching sensitive or political topics.

Approaching Business

Often, you'll find yourself in settings where business is not the expected topic—dinner parties, weddings, fundraisers, cultural events, sporting venues, etc. Even so, perhaps you'd like to subtly create a rapport around business. Here are a few of my favorites that I use to ease into work topics:

- What made you decide to work at (or create!) your company? **Then:** Isn't it wonderful how our life paths ebb and flow...taking us to places we may never have thought were possible? Just think, when you were working toward your undergraduate degree, did you envision yourself as the leader of a 500-person international environmental engineering firm?
- What's next for you? It seems that so many people reach a point in their career where they "reinvent." Do you ever think about reinventing? What would you do?
- What motivates you most at work?
- When have you been "lucky" in business? **Or:** Tell me about a turning point in your career.

In another recent example, where I met a labor lawyer, my small talk included: I've met a lot of lawyers, but none focusing on labor rights. I'm intrigued; it takes a special person to be in that role. Was this something you always wanted to focus on, or do you have a "story" behind why you became a labor lawyer?

Questions like this provide an opportunity for the person to reflect on how they got to where they are today, and they'll likely have several anecdotes from their journey—which can lead to even more questions and more conversation.

Dos and Don'ts

If you are truly committed to becoming a great conversationalist, then you should consider these tips on what belongs in small talk and what doesn't.

DO:

- **Remember that being interesting is good; being interested is even better.** Being a terrific listener, even if the topic is not of immediate interest to you, is essential. Tap into your "curious self," not unlike how you might have been as a child!
- **Share!** Equally important, you absolutely must share about yourself. Offer up little tidbits within your

comments and questions that reveal something about you. See if they bite and show you that they are interested. When done right, sharing can demonstrate vulnerability and humility, which in turn can lead to connection and trust.

- **Encourage flow.** You mustn't bombard others with question after unrelated question. Instead, you must build upon whatever the other people have said and make sure that any changes of topic are elegant rather than abrupt or awkward.

- **Be the host.** Even if you are not "officially" the host, make it your business to ensure that everyone is having a good time and that they feel included.

- **Be a bit playful.** Be willing to laugh at yourself and take appropriate opportunities to reflect your lighthearted side.

- **Create warmth.** Good conversation is not just enlightening, exciting and invigorating. When you focus on a positive exchange, it will create warmth between people. And warmth can lead to trust—in business and beyond.

DON'T:

- **Belittle, brag, exclude or make others feel inadequate.** If you ask an "elevated" question or offer up personal information only to discover that the other person has limited experiences, a different education level or a lack of knowledge on the specific topic, then subtly shift gears to something they seem more comfortable discussing. Monitor their nonverbal cues as an indicator on their level of comfort, openness and engagement.

- **Talk on and on or be completely self-absorbed.** If possible, guide the conversation to be 1/3 you, 2/3 them. Remember, being interested trumps being interesting.

- **Start a debate.** Remember that "conversationalist" does not equate to "debater." Perhaps you consider healthy debating on heady topics to be a dynamic method toward building connections and elevating the quality of discourse. But others may not share your passion for true debate. Until you get a real sense of their interest level in debating challenging—and likely controversial—topics, steer clear and focus on creating a warm and pleasant experience.

Taboos and Elevators

I do not intend to insult my readers' professionalism. You already know to avoid tasteless jokes, gossip or negative commentary about other people or companies, as well as crossing boundaries (such as private matters that are best shared between trusted friends and colleagues). I do think that when approached with a genuine open-minded interest, good conversationalists can explore otherwise "taboo"

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topics such as politics, religious practices, lifestyle choices and money. That said, one should tread very carefully; be ready to adjust and only step into this route if it's within a logical context and sequence.

Finally, many of us become anxious over our “elevator speech.” If you are having trouble coming up with the perfect, high-impact elevator speech, just remember this easy twist: Offer a one-liner of what your firm does, followed by, “A typical client might look like XYZ...” And from there, you might cite an example of how you solved a problem for one of your clients. From there, you can ask them about their firm, and they'll likely provide a similarly formatted answer. And with any luck, the conversation will continue past the elevator ride. At the very least, they'll have a clear idea of what you do and will be able to easily communicate it to others.

So how do you learn to be good at conversation? In addition to identifying and modeling your behavior around “expert” conversationalists, why not give role-playing a shot? With your co-workers or a consultant, establish mock scenarios where you describe the contact, their role, the environment and perhaps whether or not there is a business opportunity. At first, many of us (me included!) dread role-playing. Yet once we step into a “role” and realize that we are not being judged—but instead are experimenting within the safety of mock encounters—then it becomes an invaluable tool for collaborative learning and solidifying good habits.

Best of luck in your conversational endeavors!

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