

REVISED AND UPDATED

*The*  
**FINE ART**  
*of*  
**SMALL**  
**TALK**

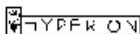
HOW TO START A CONVERSATION,  
KEEP IT GOING, BUILD NETWORKING SKILLS—  
AND LEAVE A POSITIVE IMPRESSION!

**DEBRA FINE**

# THE FINE ART OF SMALL TALK

*How to Start a Conversation, Keep  
It Going, Build Networking Skills—  
and Leave a Positive Impression!*

DEBRA FINE



NEW YORK

*To Jared Fine Holst and Sarah Fine Holst, my inspiration and motivation. And the gentle wind beneath my wings, Steve Tilliss.*

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# CONTENTS

Preface	ix
CHAPTER 1	
What's the Big Deal About Small Talk?	1
CHAPTER 2	
Get Over Your Mom's Good Intentions	12
CHAPTER 3	
Take the Plunge: Start a Conversation!	27
CHAPTER 4	
Keep the Conversation Going!	37
CHAPTER 5	
Let's Give 'Em Something to Talk About	49
CHAPTER 6	
Hearing Aids and Listening Devices	66

viii · CONTENTS

CHAPTER 7	
Prevent Pregnant Pauses with Preparation	84
CHAPTER 8	
Conversational Clout	108
CHAPTER 9	
Crimes and Misdemeanors	114
CHAPTER 10	
The Graceful Exit	139
CHAPTER 11	
The Conversational Ball Is in Your Court!	154
CHAPTER 12	
Make the Most of Networking Events!	159
CHAPTER 13	
Surviving the Singles Scene	165
CHAPTER 14	
Feel-Good Factor	185
CHAPTER 15	
Holiday Party Savvy	192
CHAPTER 16	
Carpe Diem	195
Acknowledgments	201

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## PREFACE

When I first got into the business of helping people cultivate conversation skills, I ran into a lot of skepticism. Invariably, executives would scoff at the idea of a housewife's trivial initiative to overcome boredom. Then I would get clandestine calls for assistance from folks with prestigious titles. People would construct elaborate covert operations to seek advice without actually asking for it, because they were embarrassed. I can appreciate that. In a previous life as a nerdy engineer, I was burdened with poor social skills and embarrassed by my own conversational ineptitude. Before I gave myself a remedial education in the Fine Art of Small Talk, I had been a poor communicator and a timid person for as long as I could recall.

As a girl I had been an overweight, reticent kid who sat invisible in the back of the class, often excluded because of my size. One of my most vivid memories of childhood is that of a birthday party for my third-grade classmate Rita. Every girl in my class was invited except for one other very overweight girl and me. That experience was so hurtful that I withdrew into a world of books. I had no idea how to make a friend or have a friend. Consequently, I never learned how to talk to my peers.

Naturally, when I got older, I selected a career without a high demand for conversation. I became an engineer—a perfect choice, since engineering tends to be highly technical and requires little chatting. I routinely made technical presentations or answered complex engineering questions without any trouble. All that was required was competence in my field. However, when I was sent to conferences or industry meetings, I was expected to mingle with colleagues. Network. Meet clients. I was filled with panic. I only knew one way to start a conversation. Without fail, I would ask every person I met, *What do you do?* After we exchanged career notes, the conversation invariably sputtered to an agonizing halt. I

didn't know how to keep it going. I skipped every social function I could. The ones I couldn't, I'd arrive late, leave early, and, in between, pray that some other person with better skills and a kind heart would rescue me by initiating a conversation.

I struggled with the art of conversation throughout my tenure as an engineer. Then I took a break from my career to have my two children. In that interlude, I decided that I was weary of being overweight and self-conscious. I lost sixty-five pounds. My self-image improved. I wanted to have friends and to have fun. To do so, I knew that I would have to acquire better social skills. I took note of those who were successful at cultivating friendships and mingling in a crowd. I watched their techniques and timidly began to imitate them.

My motivation went into overdrive after my husband and I divorced. I realized that I'd have to start socializing if I wanted to meet anyone. Here I was approaching forty years of age, having been out of my field for a number of years, and needing to meet people. It was a daunting prospect, to say the least. But I realized that acquiring conversation skills wasn't rocket science. I convinced myself it couldn't be that tough or I wouldn't see so many



people doing it so well. I made it my goal to figure out how to keep a conversation going for longer than five minutes.

One of my first experiments with small talk was a life-changing success. I went to happy hour at a local nightspot with a girlfriend. A man across the room began making eye contact with me. All night we kept exchanging glances, never speaking. My girlfriend prodded me. “Debra,” she said, “just go over there and say something to him.”

I replied, “Oh, I don’t know. I don’t have anything to say. Besides, if he wanted to meet me, he’d have come over by now.”

But my girlfriend would not relent. She was so adamant that her challenge finally inspired me to go over and introduce myself to him. As I walked across the room, my heart pounded so loudly, I could hardly hear myself say hello to the man I now know as Rex. He pulled out a chair and said he was delighted to meet me. From that inauspicious beginning we began to date each other. A friendship developed, and I learned a lot about Rex. The most important thing I came to learn, though, was why Rex hadn’t approached me first at the happy hour. I was certain that his reluctance was an unspoken

commentary on some fault of mine. It had to be that I was too tall, that I still weighed too much, or that I just wasn't his type. I could not have been more wrong. It wasn't about me at all. It was about him. He was too shy to approach me.

I couldn't believe it. It really turned my thinking around. For the first time I understood that there were lots of talented, educated, wonderful people in the world who are incredibly shy. I realized that if my girlfriend hadn't insisted, and if I hadn't found my courage, I never would have met a man who became an integral part of my life. No, I didn't marry him, but he did become one of my closest friends.

That experience made me a convert to small talk. I finally understood what a great tool it could be for building rapport with people. I devoted myself to learning about it, practicing it, and helping others become good at it. I started my business, *The Fine Art of Small Talk*, and have been small talking my way around the country ever since. I have met countless fascinating people and made many friends. My life is now richly populated with a diversity of individuals who bring added meaning and depth to each of my days.

My goal in writing this book is to offer what I've

learned so that you, too, can reap the rewards that come from having a repertoire of conversation skills. The techniques, tips, and skills in this book are for everyone—not just nerds. I know salespeople who are wonderful at making formal presentations but who enter a networking event in a cold sweat. I've met teachers who can chat with students and colleagues but have no idea what to say to parents at school functions. Harried, yet happy, stay-at-home moms are a bundle of entertainment at a play group but walk away from a Junior League meeting or church event feeling isolated and disconnected. I know one physician who closed his practice and joined an HMO because, despite his gift as a healer, he lacked the conversation skills and confidence to garner new referrals. The list goes on. Competent people from all walks of life need assistance to develop conversation skills.

This book will provide you those small talk skills. Enhancing your conversational skills will no doubt improve your quality of life. I think you'll be surprised at the potency of small talk. It has an amazing ripple effect. Becoming a good conversationalist will bring new people into your network of friends and colleagues. You will find joy in the social events you used to dread, and you will create pathways and channels for new opportunities

to present themselves. My dear friend Rex met an early death a couple of years ago in a car accident in Mexico. It is a reminder to me that the risk of engaging someone new in conversation pales in comparison to the risk of driving a car. Rex lived a lot in his forty-plus years. I am grateful that I ventured across the room to become a part of that short life.

Take a moment. Spend some time filling out the following “Winning at Small Talk” worksheet. If you answer yes to most, you are certainly on the right track. If you find yourself responding no to more than a few, it’s time to get to work.

## WINNING AT SMALL TALK

Please answer “yes” or “no” to the following questions:

1. I have joined or participated in at least one club or group activity in order to develop new business friendships or to meet new people this year.

Yes     No

2. I’m conscious of “taking turns” in most conversations so that I can learn more about others and help them get to know me.

Yes     No

3. In the past year, I have used my contacts to help at least two people find a new job, get a date, hook up with potential customers and clients, or I have provided information for other networking purposes.

Yes     No

4. I go to at least two functions a month where I can meet people in my profession/industry or who are potential decision-makers.

Yes     No

5. If someone is friendly toward me, it is easy to be friendly back. However, I don't wait to make sure someone is friendly before I am friendly toward him or her.

Yes     No

6. When someone asks me, "What's new?" instead of saying "Not much," I often talk about something exciting in my life.

Yes     No

7. At meetings, parties, job fairs, and such, I introduce myself to people I don't know and come away knowing the names of at least three new people.

Yes     No

Well, how did you do? Once you master Small Talk, you are guaranteed to:

- Build business
- Make friends
- Improve networking skills
- Get dates
- Land jobs

All right—that's enough small talking. Let's get down to business!

THE FINE ART  
OF SMALL TALK





## WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT SMALL TALK?

**Y**ou 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