
How Small is Your Talk?

By Lothar Katz

*After moving to the United States almost 20 years ago, it took me more than a year to **stop telling people how I was doing when they asked.***

Every time someone asked me “How’re you doing?,” my response would be something like “Great! We had a really nice weekend. Good friends of ours are in town, and we drove down to ...” or “Unfortunately, I didn’t sleep that well last night, so I have a bit of a headache right now that somehow won’t go away ...” I would go on rambling like this until I felt I had shared enough information, which usually took a few minutes.

For some strange reason, my interlocutors often seemed slightly irritated by my response. In hindsight, I realize they were probably trying to figure out why I was telling them all this.

The answer would have to be: “Because you asked!”

Where I come from, “How are you doing?” is an invitation to enter into the kind of social chit chat we call Small Talk. You talk about whatever comes to mind: what you did last, what you’re up to next, or the weather, if you want to keep things safe. Not responding in this way means you are either in a big hurry, which you’ll at least have to explain, or that you don’t like the other person at all. Not a good message to send.

It took me quite some time to figure out that in the U.S., giving a full response to “How are you?” not only isn’t necessarily expected: doing so can be outright impolite, especially in business settings. All it takes to satisfy the greeting ritual here is a passing “Fine, and you?,” accompanied by a smile. With that done, you are welcome to walk away. Small talk is optional, and when there is some, it is usually brief. In fact, a 1995 academic study found generic small talk utterances by male U.S.-Americans to be comprised of less than three words on average. Time is money, right?

Being the experienced international traveler, you probably know that conventions around small talk vary greatly across different countries and cultures. A European linguistic project reports that the time expected to be spent in business conversations before someone says what they really want is next to zero in Switzerland or Finland, less than five minutes in Ireland, about ten in Poland. Look around the world, and you’ll find much bigger variances: in Mexico or Colombia, this could easily be thirty minutes to an hour. In parts of the Arab World, the expectation might well be not to have any serious business talks at all during the first meeting, where hours and hours may be dedicated to small talk that solely serves the purpose of getting to know each other and building rapport.

Let the Host Lead the Way

Showing impatience can be deadly in Arab countries and anywhere else where strong relationships matter in business. Keep in mind: that’s most of the world! Coming across as not being interested in others, which is how impatience is often interpreted, can cause business interactions to stall. That’s why a good guideline is to always let your local

contact(s) set the pace. Come prepared to conduct small talk as long as they want to do so, no matter how long it takes, and watch for signs telling you when they are ready to talk business.

Keep It Safe

Small talk not only serves to connect people, it is also kind of a test: is the other person compatible with me and willing/able to see things from my perspective?

The underlying expectations introduce serious pitfalls and 'stepping over the line' can have grave consequences. Asking a Saudi host whether he has children is a great conversation starter. Asking whether he is married and what his wife does is a huge fauxpas—in this strictly male-dominated culture, everything related to female family members is none of your business. Talking to a Chilean about Argentina, or to a Korean about Japan, will put you on another slippery slope, as significant tensions exist between these cultures. Asking a French or Italian what they do isn't a good idea, either. People in these (and other) countries don't define their identity by what they do and likely view the question as superficial.

Because of such pitfalls, it is a good idea to find out upfront about sensitive or unwelcome topics in the country. If you were unable to do so, at least keep it safe: keep your small talk to subjects such as the weather, the country and city you're visiting, your hobbies, or your last vacation.

Open Up, and Don't Forget to Listen

While you'll want to avoid sensitive topics, small talk is nevertheless a great opportunity to share something personal. Before engaging in business, members of many cultures want to know who you really are, so prepare to open up and share something that tells your contacts about yourself, your values, and your interests.

At the same time, keep in mind that showing serious interest in the other person is equally important. People love talking about themselves, so be a great listener. If you take the 'small' in small talk as a reminder to frequently let others do more, though not all, of the talking, you'll do just fine!

Lothar Katz is an International Business Advisor, the author of "Negotiating International Business – The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries Around the World," and a contributor to "Building Cultural Competence." He has a wealth of experience in achieving productive cooperation across cultures and driving business success on a global scale.

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