

# Say What?

## Communication is a fine art

DENISE FORD-MITCHELL  
■ THE SAGINAW NEWS

Knowing how to work a room has its rewards.

When done properly, small talk can enhance professional contacts and build friendships, business leaders say.

"Whether it's a social setting or business gathering, individuals should be prepared to talk about something they have some knowledge of," Saginaw Township resident Steve Avery said.

Contrary to what some people may think, schmoozing does have a purpose. The goal is to ease the amount of apprehension and tension among people in the room, explained the former human resources professional for Midland's Dow Chemical Co.

"It takes practice. What you're trying to do is make others comfortable in a non-threatening way. The challenge, however, is to be prepared with a series of open-ended questions, especially if you're in a situation where you don't know a lot of the people.

"Using a little humor helps get past the challenge of not knowing someone. When people are perceived as trying to talk to others, people will open up and try to include the person. However, if the person isn't making any effort, people will ignore that individual."

Author Debra P. Fine agrees. For years, the 48-year-old former engineer found it difficult to step out of her comfort zone during company meetings and social encounters. A continuing battle with her weight and low self-esteem also didn't help matters.

After shedding nearly 70 pounds, Fine mustered the courage to confront her insecurities.



PLEASE SEE **TALK — BACK PAGE** ▶ Debra P. Fine

## Starting points

Most folks don't relish the thought of starting a conversation with anyone in a room filled with strangers. If that scenario makes you cringe, Debra P. Fine, author of the book "The Fine Art of Small Talk," offers these tips to help you start a conversation, keep it going and leave with a positive impression.

### Icebreakers

- "What is your connection to the host/hostess?"
- "What got you involved in this organization/charity?"
- "Tell me about your work...." "Tell me about your family...."
- "What do you enjoy the most about this time/season of the year?"
- "Who do you know that might ... need a new marketing professional?," "Know about recreational activities in this area?," "Want to meet a single woman like me?"
- "Bring me up-to-date about your life/work/family since the last time we got together ..."
- "Describe that for me ..."
- "What does that involve ..."
- "Why?"
- "How did you ... come up with that idea?" "Meet?" "Become interested in teaching high school?"

### Conversation "killers"

- "Are you married?" or "Do you have any kids?" Where are you going with either one of these if the response is "No?"
- "How's your job at Ford Motor Co., General Motors, etc.?" What if they were fired or laid off and don't have an interest in discussing their specific circumstances? Unless you know a person well, assume nothing! Don't put them on the spot. Instead ask: "What's been going on with work?"
- "How's your wife?" (She left, took the money, the kids and the got the house!). Instead: "Bring me up to date, what has been going on with the family?"
- At all costs avoid "Is that real?" "Are those real?"

SOURCE: DEBRA P. FINE, AUTHOR OF "THE FINE ART OF SMALL TALK."

## TALK

### Small talk is conversation's 'appetizer'

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"I had an idea that other people like me wanted to learn conversational skills," she remarked.

The result was the 143-page paperback book, "The Fine Art of Small Talk," (\$12.95) and a new career as owner of the personal development training company, SmallTalk.

"Engineers are not chatty people, so I used to hate talking with people," she explained in a telephone interview from her home in suburban Denver. "I really struggled with it, plus I was really overweight so I felt totally out of control.

"I was the person always in the corner. I gained a lot of confidence when I lost the weight. I wanted to be more comfortable around people so it was important for me to learn conversational skills. I enjoy talking a lot more now and it has changed my life. Now I teach others techniques to approach people."

The newly revised second-edition book — published by Small Talk Publishers — offers conversation tips to help people confidently break the ice and keep conversations going in a pinch.

"I used to think if a person was pretty, handsome, trim or a company CEO, that person didn't have a problem talking to people. I thought dorky and overweight people were the only folks who felt that way.

"Instead, I found that very capable people, including movie stars, business executives and journalists, have trouble just like everyone else finding things to talk about. It's not a reflection on a person's abilities."

In her book, Fine offers tips to start a conversation, keep it going, build a rapport and leave a positive impression. The book covers everything from "What's the big deal about small talk?" to "Hearing Aids and Listening Devices" to "The Graceful Exit" and "Holiday Party Savvy."

"Some people are born with a gift that enables them to talk to strangers and not feel uncomfortable. Those people are the folks who do well with small talk because they assume the burden of the comfort of the people they are talking to. They come prepared

to talk, so there is never an awkward situation.

"It's the really shy people and folks who don't care about the comfort zone of others who don't do so well with small talk. The shy people don't have much to say and the other type monopolize the conversation.

Fine said any conversation should prove a worthwhile opportunity to make a connection with another person.

"Unfortunately, too many people tend to dismiss folks if they can't help them today — without looking down the road.

"Small talk should be considered the appetizer in a conversation. Those who do it well make others feel like they are part of the main course."

Kathleen McGraw Heyn, a Saginaw Township independent national vice president with Arbonne International, agrees.

"If people are genuinely interested in getting to know people and what's going on with them, they shouldn't have any problems with small talk, because it's just that," said the married mother of three.

As an independent distributor of Arbonne, a Swiss skin care and cosmetic company, and a former attorney, Heyn frequently rubs shoulders with clients in business and social settings.

"It's a huge turn-off if you're with people who are just slinging stuff just to talk — and you can tell when someone is doing that. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care," Heyn explained.

Good conversationalists have one thing in common, excellent listening skills, she added.

"Once you have your listening skills down, you're ready for anything because you'll have something to focus on in a conversation. There are two kinds of people in this life, the first are those who walk into a room and say, 'Well, here I am' and there are those who say, 'Ahh, there you are,' " Heyn remarked.

"Good conversationalists strive to be the 'Ahh there you are' people in a room." ■

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