

FAST COMPANY

4/15/14

Why You Need To Master The Lost Art Of Small Talk In The Gchat Era

This skill can help you do better in work, love, and life. So step away from the laptop, and get gabbing.

By Matt Haber

On a recent Monday night, patrons at Trick Dog, a bar in San Francisco's Mission District known for its elaborate cocktails, were treated to an unusual spectacle, even by local standards. As they stood around the vintage bar sipping astrology-themed drinks and nibbling fish tacos, and thrice cooked fries, two men in lab coats and clipboards approached couples and groups with an unusual offer: To help facilitate conversation and teach g-chatting, DMing, sexting Internet beings how to have some old fashioned small talk.

It seemed to work in the case of Benjamin Wachs and Star St. Germain, who had come to the bar together but didn't know one another all that well. Wachs, a writer, knew St. Germain, whose business card reads "designer / developer / illustrator / instigator" through friends, but they hadn't spent that much time alone together. Their conversation was cordial, but until they encountered the men in lab coats, probably not one for the history books.

Upon spotting the men in lab coats entered, St. Germain wondered what the bit was and welcomed their approach. Soon, the technicians were offering the duo prompts printed on cards (example: "How does a microwave work? If you don't know, pretend you are an expert and fabricate with conviction") and encouraging them to expand their conversation to include others. "At some level we out because we want to be social," Mr. Wachs said later. "We want something to happen."

Clearly, something was happening.

St. Germain, who has pink hair and a septum piercing and was wearing a T-shirt that said, "FROM THE FUTURE," described herself as a science buff. "I'm into behavioral science," she says. "What makes people tick?"

That question gets at the heart of what the two men in lab coats are up to. They are Rob Baedeker and Chris Colin, authors of *What To Talk About On a Plane*, at a Cocktail Party, in a Tiny Elevator with Your Boss's Boss, a book about the lost art of chit chat out today from Chronicle. (Tony Millionaire, creator of the Maakies comic and house illustrator for *The Believer*, supplied the book's images.) Seeing a technology-enabled decline in basic, open-ended conversation all around them, the authors took it upon themselves to create a kind of handbook for the new Silent Generation.

Amber Rosenberg, a San Francisco-based life and career coach with twenty years of experience helping thousands of private clients as well as companies like Google, Adobe, and Morgan Stanley improve communication and leadership, agrees that small talk is an essential part of connecting, especially when it comes to your professional life.

"A lot of people have negative connotations with small talk, but I look at it as a pathway for connecting," Rosenberg tells *Fast Company*. Rosenberg cites a recent study from the University of Massachusetts that audited 133 managers and determined that likability is a key to getting hired and advancing in the workplace.

"A big piece of likability is small talk," Rosenberg explained. "You don't just walk into a networking event and say, 'Hey you got a job for me?' You need to set the stage for likability first."

Rosenberg's advice for those afraid of trivial chatter?

"When in doubt, if you're feeling awkward or weird, make it about the other person," Rosenberg says. "Really engaging people with meaningful questions is a way to get going so it doesn't feel superficial."

Baedeker believes there are other fears at play, too.

"People are afraid of looking stupid," says the 42-year-old consultant and comedy writer with Kasper Hauser, the group that brought the world *Sky Maul* and *Earn Your MBA on the Toilet*. "They mistakenly think conversation is about them." What he and Colin, 38, a writer for *Afar*, the *Atavist*, and other publications, show is that conversation, at its best, is a shared improvisation, a braiding of sensibilities, topics, and time.

"I was just telling Rob, we're not young anymore—especially Rob," jokes Colin. "We're running out of time. When you think about the awesome nights with friends, partners, family, whatever, you think, What's the deal? Why can't I have that every night? It's still me. I still have the same brain. Why even with friends is [conversation] just OK?"

5 Tips for Better Conversation from the authors of *What to Say*

Ask for stories not for answers

Rob Baedeker: "Questions like 'How was your day?' or 'How are you doing?' are closed. If you ask, 'What's your story?' it's more generous."

Be curious

Baedeker: "This takes practice."

Chris Colin: "For a good conversation you need to have mutual faith. We're always multi-tasking, not just in our tasks, but our thinking and multi-conversationing."

Prepare

Baedeker: "If you're going to a party, do a little homework."

Colin: "It's more than just having a line at a party. It's know thyself. Being aware of what your interests are."

Cycle down

Colin: "If you're going to meet someone at, say, a bar, if you're ten minutes early, walk around the block once. You're forcing yourself to cycle down and disconnect. You don't have to have any deep thoughts, but just walking around without your phone for ten minutes is so banal but rare for us. It puts you in the right place."

Know your style--then change it

Baedeker: "Know your style and stretch beyond it. We call it Steamrollers and Pancakes. Try the other mode for a night."

One reason our conversations may be less-than amazing is our dependence on smart phones to both take us out of the moment and settle any questions or debates that arise when we actually find ourselves talking to someone. "I'm embarrassed by how clingy I am with my devices," Baedeker admits. "I don't get out in the world as much as I used to -I'm ashamed of it."

One thing both authors advise is more active listening, a lost skill in conversation. You also need to, in Colin's words, "destabilize" your partner to get a different space.

"People have about thirty minutes of patter in them," Colin says. "You've gotta get passed it."

"Get somebody out of their head and into the conversation," Baedeker adds. "You gotta break em down."

"Sort of knock you back on your heels a little bit," says Colin.

At this point, it's natural to wonder how these two converse with each other. Baedeker, the seemingly more earnest half of the team, keeps a straight face and drops very well-timed conversational bombs. Colin, on the other hand, tends to be more animated and people-pleasing, going for higher volume jokes delivered more regularly. To see these

two work the room together, as they did at Trick Dog, is to watch a pair of musicians from different genres attempt to harmonize.

The book on talk

“The nice thing about conversation is that everyone has that personal style,” Colin says. “It has to come from a pure heart. If your intentions are good and open and honest and genuine, you can use it. If not, you're just another person trying to get it going and people can tell.”

Back at the the bar, Baedeker and Colin moved on from Wachs and St. Germain, but not before both thanked the men in lab coats and gave them hugs. Wachs even bought another patron a drink at Baedeker's prompting, then toasted his conversational coach: “I applaud you!” Colin had found his way to a table with two men and three women, breaking the ice by explaining “The reason we're here is to talk about talking.”

The group was soon laughing and smiling as prompts begat prompts and the whole conversation began to feel like a roundelay with each person taking a turn and passing the focus to the next. Suddenly, it didn't even matter that there were two dudes pretending to be doctors offering verbal healing: The gang had been destabilized, knocked back on their heels, and was achieving conversational liftoff. Baedeker and Colin left them. The night was still young-- there was a lot to talk about.