

Mastering small talk on Zoom without feeling icky

A short guide to helping you join in with small talk,
especially on zoom, by Jon Baker.

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**ACTIVATE YOUR
INTROVERT**

Electronic small talk can seem harder.

- From a technical perspective it's harder to cut into the conversation.
- There are extra barriers. That's your technical skills AND theirs and the system itself.
- Psychologically it's harder as you're still "at home", having not travelled there.
- It just feels colder, harder and you didn't like it even when it was "face to face."

Just before dealing with some of those, let's go back to basics.

Why does it matter?

Small talk is like a conversational lubricant, maybe not always needed but it often helps people ease into a more meaningful conversation. It can be an important skill to develop, as it unlocks deeper discussion you do want (need?). As well as being better at small talk, the skill of moving it to relevant conversation needs to be remembered.

Why do some people struggle?

Most introverts don't like, or hate, small talk. They cite various things from 'pointless' to they 'uncomfortable'. Many people, especially introverts, prefer much deeper, real or relevant conversation, with people they need to converse with.

Having a plan of surviving small talk helps get to the more relevant conversation.

Anything that makes the discussion feel more stilted can make it harder, discussion over the web doesn't help anybody (especially introverts).

12 steps to help.

1. **Be clear on the relevance.** If you're going to do something you don't really enjoy, you need a good reason. Are you trying to develop a relationship, get known in a group of people? What's your positive reason?
2. **Practice:** Practice on the platform beforehand. Zoom accounts are free to set up and you can have a conversation with yourself (or a friend) to ensure you know how to use all the functions. You'll feel more confident as the real conversation starts if you're proficient using the system and already know how you look on camera. Speaking of which...
3. **Minimise:** Most people don't like watching themselves but keep doing it in the call ("do I look OK"). Check you look OK on screen before starting, then set 'speaker view' and minimise the zoom screen. You'll end up with a matchbox size zoom screen showing just the person speaking. It's easier to focus on them and not worry about your image (or other people's). Drag that small screen so it's as close as possible to your camera. Now you can see the speaker and look at the camera the whole time. You'll look more interested and be more focused.

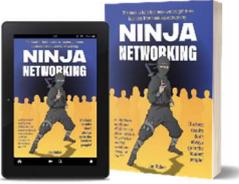
4. **Plan:** Small talk is a discussion, not an interrogation. Introverts tend not to share personal information with people they don't know well, yet some of this personal information is what will help the conversation flow. Plan one or two topics that you're comfortable discussing, preferably ones that are important to you, that you would be comfortable sharing. I hate football and many of the "normal" topics, For me, diving, skiing, introversion – how about you? If people know your subject in advance, you may also make it easier for them to talk to you; hence why my love of scuba diving is so public.
5. **Have a buddy.** Heading into a group of people with somebody who knows how you feel and what you'd feel comfortable talking about will help. They can "throw you" questions or invite you into the conversation. This can make it easier to join in, on a topic you are more comfortable discussing. If small talk moves onto scuba diving, I no longer think of it as small talk. Some of my buddies make that happen. What's your topic and who could your buddies be? Private chat can give you a big advantage when using zoom, as you can prompt them, then thank them as they hook you into the discussion.
6. **Research:** If you know you're likely to be engaging somebody in conversation, do the introvert thing and do background work. What on their LinkedIn, or Facebook, suggests topics you could ask them about? If you get somebody talking on something that's relevant to them the conversation tends to flow more easily. A great advantage of zoom is that you can look people up on LinkedIn whilst in the discussion but be careful your eyes are still looking at the camera while you do it.
7. **Travel:** If you're working from home, make it feel like work. Some dress for work, some take a 5 minute simulated journey to work. Be at work, not "at home".
8. **Question listen and question.** Introverts are good listeners and combined with asking relevant questions you'll be able to get the other people talking about things they like. Stop worrying about being interesting, aim to be interested. When you're interested, you'll find obvious questions in what they're saying. Warning – don't turn this into an interrogation; be ready to give your view on the subject you question about too. If the conversation is too loud to interrupt, use the chatbox.
9. **Ask real questions** – don't try to remember "clever" questions, more than one of those get boring.
10. **Ask questions where you have knowledge / stories:** Shared experiences and areas that open their (and your) thinking are good.
11. **Add value:** Is there something useful you can add, a perspective, some relevant information, or give something of yourself away? Don't "give advice" or "feedback" unless you're asked.
12. **Summarise:** As you're listening carefully, you can summarise parts of the conversation and give credit to people that said things you liked. It's a great way to talk, without questioning and without having to think of a new subject. What's more, you've praised people, which is always good.

Your zoom small talk checklist

System:		
	You have practiced using the system	
	Set the screen so you focus on the speaker only, while looking at the camera	
	Be multi modal. Use the chat box as well as speaking. The chat box allows chatting privately to one person or the group. It also allows you to chat even when you can't interrupt a loud conversation.	
Them		
	You know something about the other people (LinkedIn research) that you could bring into the discussion.	
	Focus on being interested in the others, don't worry about being interesting (leave that to the self-absorbed people). People will find you interesting, if you're interested.	
You		
	Something about you which you're happy to reveal.	
	Question, listen, question. Have one or two (only) questions you could ask if you got stuck, then listen to the answers and develop the conversation.	
	Summarise: Mini summaries in the discussion "I love the way X said Y" work well in chat or speaking. They allow you to positively link other people into the conversation.	

More resources to help you

Jon Baker has published the following books which you'll find useful. They are available on Amazon and you can get more information at <https://jon-baker.me>

	<p>For practical ideas on running meetings that make things happen and engage your whole team.</p> <p>This short book is available in paperback or on kindle</p>
	<p>For improving your networking results, especially if you're introverted.</p> <p>This easy to read book with practical steps is available in paperback.</p>
 <p>Introvert in Business How understanding introversion can improve your business.</p>	<p>For practical ideas on introversion, activating introverts and improving productivity in your team, visit https://introvertinbusiness.co.uk/</p>
 <p>ACTIVATE YOUR INTROVERT</p>	<p>Activate Your Introvert is a weekly radio show with hints, tips, and expert interviews. Learn more about introversion and related subjects, in 15 minute chunks. It's available on all the major podcast platforms.</p>