Small talk and keeping the conversation going

Catherine: Good morning, and welcome to Business Today, with me Catherine Perou, your Business English guide. If you’re a non-native English speaker like me, you might find yourself thinking so hard about how to say something, you lose sight of what to say. Well, this show is all about the how’s and the whys.

Today we’re going to be looking at making small talk. With me here in the studio is Mark Ford, a communications expert, who has some tips for us on how to keep a conversation going. Mark, welcome.

Mark: Thanks Catherine.

Catherine: So what is small talk and why is it so important?

Mark: Well, a study at the Stanford University School of Business tracked a group of MBAs 10 years after they graduated and found that their grades had nothing to do with their success, but their ability to hold a conversation with others did.

Catherine: So being able to connect with others through small talk can lead to big things?

Mark: Absolutely, and so with that in mind I thought I might offer the following tips for starting, and ending conversations.

Catherine: Go ahead.

Mark: Well, be the first to say "hello." If you're not sure the other person will remember you, offer your name. For example, "Catherine Perou? I’m Mark Ford, we met last year at the annual convention... it’s good to see you again." And always shake hands when you meet someone. Also, take your time during introductions. Make an extra effort to remember names and use them frequently, this way you’ll remember them. Then try to get the other person talking by leading with a common ground statement regarding the event or location and then asking a related open-ended question. For example, "There seem to be a lot of people here this year, how long have you been coming to these conventions?" And you can also ask them how they got there, or how they know the host, if you’re at a social gathering. It’s also vital to maintain eye contact. Don’t glance around the room while they are talking to you. Try to stay focused on your conversational partner by actively listening, with sounds like uh uh, and I see, and giving feedback, like I know what you mean.

Catherine: Uh hu, I see, so basically, you’re saying listen more than you talk.
Mark: Well, yes, but you should still have something interesting to contribute. Keeping up with current events and culture will provide you with great conversation builders, leading with "What do you think of...?" Have you heard...?" But obviously, stay away from negative or controversial topics, like politics, and avoid long stories or giving a lot of detail in casual conversation...

Catherine: ...or asking about money.

Mark: Oh yes. Asking personal financial questions of people that you have just met is really inappropriate. It’s fine to ask what somebody does or what he likes about his career, but don’t ask how much he makes. Most people will find this question rude.

Catherine: What about if there are people you especially want to meet, can you just walk up to them?

Mark: Well, one of the best ways to approach them is to be introduced by someone they know, so ask a mutual friend to introduce you. And if there’s no one else, introduce yourself politely, with the suitable respect, maybe saying, Pardon me, Mr President, let’s say, it’s an honour to meet you. I’m, and tell them your name, and how you’ve been an admirer for years!

Catherine: What about joining a conversation?

Mark: Yes, before entering into a conversation that’s already in progress, look and listen. You don’t want to ruin things with a bad remark.

Catherine: And what about getting out of a conversation, politely? You know, when you’re bored, for example!

Mark: Yeah that happens a lot. You want to have a few exit lines ready, so that you can both politely move on. For example, "I need to check on a client over there," or "I missed lunch today, so I need to visit the buffet," or you can always offer to refresh their drink. And talk about, talking, I’m sorry, about exiting a conversation, your aim in all conversations should be to make a good impression and leave people wanting more. So to do that one should always try to follow the following advice; be bright, be brief, and then be gone.

Catherine: Mark, I think that’s a great point to close on. Thanks for being with us, and in our next show we’ll be discussing how to take control on the phone. So until next time, all the best.
Exercises

Answer the following questions true or false while listening to the podcast.

1. Stanford business students spent ten years learning to make small talk.
2. Remember names by repeating them when you meet someone.
3. Maintain eye contact.
4. Start conversation by telling people about yourself.
5. Never ask about salaries.
6. Never introduce yourself to someone you don’t know.
7. Watch carefully before joining a conversation in progress
8. Prepare how some things to say to exit conversations.

Match the following words or phrases from the podcast with their synonym on the right.

| 1. Tracked | a. Advice |
| 2. Tips | b. Arguable |
| 3. Leading | c. Comment |
| 4. Vital | d. Followed |
| 5. Controversial | e. Important |
| 6. Rude | f. Insulting |
| 7. Mutual | g. Shared |
| 8. Remark | h. Starting |