

10 Tips for Starting and ending a Conversation

The ability to network is becoming one of the fastest growing skills in business, but I've always found one of the difficulties is starting and ending conversations. Ending is the tricky one, trying to do this without offending. So I've come up with ten tips to start and end conversations in a social setting. I think just in time too, since we're fast approaching the Christmas party season.

1. Start with what's relevant now. If you are at a conference, talk about the last speaker, the evening event, or the best session you attended. At a social event you can ask, "Do you know John and Mary Smith very well?"
2. Aim to be friendly, not brilliant. What you say at first is not really important. The main point is to convey warmth and interest in the other person so that you connect. You can say something like, "The chocolate cake is amazing – try some," or "How do you like the conference so far?"
3. Go to where people gather. The food table and bar are natural places for starting a conversation. Simply comment on how wonderful the shrimp dip looks, and then explore into what they think of the food, décor, or event.
4. Start with a general topic which almost anyone can relate to. That's why, in Britain, we often talk about the weather – we all experience it. You can also talk about the latest movie, sports or community event. Care with politics and religion.
5. Start with something positive and complimentary about the host, décor, food or event. If you begin with something negative, people will think of you as a negative person.
6. Pick up on what people say. When someone mentions they just got back from holiday, ask them where they went, how they liked it, if they would recommend this place, etc... Gently prompt for more information. You can say, "I heard you mention..." "I'd love to hear more about..." "You mentioned an interest in..."
7. Ask open-ended questions, such as "How are things going with your new project?" "What's your opinion of..." rather than yes/no questions. Try not to use the standard probing questions, we all know about. They can give an interrogative feel to a new conversation. Instead use brief assertions. Verbal ones such as "yes", "I see", "go on". Non verbal ones such as nodding, facial expressions of interest and eye contact.
8. Keep your attention on the person you're talking to and that means good eye contact. It's very easy to be distracted and keep glancing around to see who else is in the room. This comes over as shallow and rude. Practise your peripheral vision to spot new people trying to join your group. Be open with them and bring them into the conversation, by saying something like "Hi, we're talking about the last speaker...what did you think her angle was on ...?"
9. Look for signs that the conversation is winding down. If your conversation partner is sending signals that he/she wants to leave, prepare to close the conversation. These signals can be: answering in monosyllables, body language such as looking at their watch or moving towards the doorway, or comments such as "I have to make a phone call in 10 minutes."
10. Ready to end the conversation? You don't need an excuse. Say something positive and then give your parting comment. For example: "It's been a pleasure talking to you about leadership training. I need to speak with someone over there." Signal the end of the conversation by offering your hand to shake and say something like, "I really enjoyed meeting you." *Then leave – no excuses are needed!*