

Training and Coaching Your Team in the Art of Small Talk

Making small talk to establish rapport and uncover member financial needs is a critical skill that MemberShoppers measures. Some people think that the ability to make small talk is an innate skill. We often hear someone say that a person has the “gift of gab.” The fact is that the art of small talk is a learned rather than innate skill. People can be trained and coached to make effective small talk. Use these tips to coach your team in the art of small talk.

Share Topic Ideas

Reproduce the material on pages 2 through 4 of this document. Review topic ideas with your team. Challenge them to add their own topics and questions. During a team meeting list one of the general areas such as *Hobbies and Interests* and ask the team to share cues they have noted or questions they have asked to get people involved in talking about this topic.

Relate Topic Ideas to Member Financial Needs

Once your team has generated a list of topics and questions, begin relating the topics and questions to improving members’ financial lives. During a team meeting ask questions like these:

- What kind of topics and questions allow us to determine whether we can save the member some money on their vehicle loan?
- Provide some topics and questions that can help us determine whether we can save the member time and/or money with a real estate loan.
- What questions can we ask to determine if a member has a need for small business services?
- What areas of small talk can help us determine whether a member has a need for retirement planning? Give some examples of questions we could ask to determine that need.

Ask Your Team to Observe the Masters

One way to help more inexperienced team members learn the art of small talk is to have them observe how effective team members use small talk. Pair inexperienced team members with your effective team members during a member interview. Ask the inexperienced team member to make note of the questions that the effective team member used to build rapport and uncover financial needs.

Catch Them Doing it Right

When you hear a team member making effective small talk, be sure to let them know that they have done a good job.

Coach by Walking Around

After observing an interaction with a member, approach the team member. Tell the team member what he or she did right. Then, challenge the team member with this question: “What is one area of small talk that you could have used with that member to build rapport or open the door for discovering financial needs?”

The Art of Small Talk for Credit Union Professionals

Small talk is anything but small when you're a business professional. In fact, one study by Stanford University business school tracked MBAs ten year after graduation and found that the ability to converse with others was more critical to success than grade point average. For credit union professionals, small talk is a kind of social bridge that spans the gap between being complete strangers and asking people about their financial lives.

While making small talk might seem like it just comes natural to some people, those who have mastered the art say it took them many years to perfect their skills. The best way to learn how to make small talk is to observe those who are good at it. Note what they talk about and what questions they ask. In the meantime, here are some ideas to get you started.

Appropriate Compliments

Some appropriate things to compliment people on include the following:

- Eyeglasses
- Jewelry or accessories
- Vehicle
- Team logo wear
- College/school logo wear
- Church/community logo wear

Conversations can also spring up around these compliments. For example, a comment about a college logo on a sweatshirt can lead to a discussion about a family member's plans to attend the same college or the need for a student loan. When commenting about personal items it is appropriate to ask where they were purchased but not appropriate to ask how much they cost.

Shared Experiences

Ironically, people often bond around negative experiences more than they do positive ones. For example, note how strangers bond in an airport when a flight is delayed. If the flight were on time, they wouldn't even acknowledge one another. The key to this icebreaker is to choose neutral topics that don't make you appear to be a negative person. Some examples of neutral topics are the weather or the traffic.

Other ideas for shared experiences include the following:

- A comment on last night's game
- A comment on a popular television show. *"Did you watch American Idol last night? What did you think of the outcome?"*
- A comment about a new restaurant or shop

General Credit Union Knowledge

A good way to break the ice is to ask new members what they know about credit unions and how they came to choose your credit union. It might sound something like this:

“What do you know about credit unions?”

“What brought you to choose this credit union?”

Family/Pets

People love to talk about their children, their grandchildren and their pets. This can also help you uncover financial needs. Here are some opening questions:

“How old is your child?”

“What school does your child go to?” or if a member who is new to the area: *“Have you found a school/preschool yet?”*

“When is his/her birthday?”

“What grade is your child in?”

“What does he/she plan to do after high school?” (for older teens).

“I’ll bet they’re involved in a lot of activities...”

Work/Business

Many people like to talk about the kind of work they do. If they own a business, they like to tell others how they started their business and how their business has grown. The following cues can help you get the conversation started:

Company logo wear
Company logo on a vehicle
Paycheck or company check
Employment questions on an account application

Here are some sample questions:

“How do you like working at XYZ Company?”

“How long have you worked there?”

“What do you do at XYZ Company?”

“How does one become a _____ at XYZ Company?”

“When do you plan to retire? Does the company have a good pension plan?” (for those 50 and older)

“How long have you owned your business?”

“How did you know that your business would be a success?”

“What services does your business provide?”

Hobbies/Interests

People like to talk about their hobbies and interests. The following cues can help you get the conversation started:

Sports team logo wear
Crafted and handmade items—sweaters, embroidered shirts, etc.

Home

Finding out about a person's home can help you uncover real estate lending needs. The conversation usually begins with a comment about the person's home address. A casual remark such as *"That's a nice area."* or *"I see you live on Maple Street. What is that near?"* can be followed up with these questions:

"Do you own your home or are you renting?"
"How long have you lived there?"
"Why did you choose that neighborhood?"
"How do you like the area?"
"Would you buy in that area?" (For renters)

Noting a person's home address can also help you save the person time by suggesting credit union or shared branch locations or no-surcharge ATMs in the area.

Vacations/Holidays

It's easy to make small talk near holiday times and before summer vacation. Ask people what their holiday plans are—if they'll do anything special or stay and home and entertain others. This conversation can help you uncover needs for all types of services—ATM cards, credit cards, traveler's checks, vacation loans, and holiday clubs. Offer valuable advice and service. For example, suggest that your member inform the credit card company that she will be travelling overseas or suggest e-statements so that a credit union statement will not sit in a mailbox while the member is away. Offer to look up ATM locations or shared branch locations in the area where your member is visiting.

Vehicle

One way to uncover needs while making interesting small talk is to comment on a person's vehicle. You might actually see the vehicle or you might look at a credit report and note that the person has a loan. Questions might include the following:

"How do you like your Camry?"
"Would you recommend that vehicle to others?"
"How long have you owned your truck?"
"What dealership did you get it from? What was your experience there? Would you recommend them to others?"