

Ep #16: Eliminating Small Talk from Your Day



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With Your Host

Rachel Cannon

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Welcome to *Loudmouth Introvert*, a podcast for helping creative introverted entrepreneurs thrive, despite living in a world that's designed for extroverts to succeed. If you're ready to make more money and build the creative business you've been dreaming of, you're in the right place. I'm your host Rachel Cannon.

Hi! How are you? How've you been? How's your family? Has work been busy? What have you been up to? Do anything fun lately?

Welcome back to the podcast, friends. Did that intro give you anxiety? Did you shut down? Hopefully, you didn't abandon this episode and you're still listening because today is all about how to eliminate this kind of small talk from your day. Now, obviously, you're going to have to make small talk at some point, but I'm going to share with you how to easily dash out of those kinds of conversations, which – if you're an introvert – you already know are incredibly draining by virtue of their triviality.

But before we get into that, I want to share another Loudmouth Letter with you – and maybe the reason I love sharing these so much is that there is nothing trivial about them. My listeners know how to go deep right off the bat, and I love it. Alyak_newton writes:

“Rachel is phenomenal. Not only are her designs beautiful, but she understands business and introverts. She is changing the business game for introverted creatives, and giving us all hope, inspiration, and real life advice. I can't thank her enough for putting herself out there in the form of this podcast. It's gold for those of us who are talented creatives, but lackluster when it comes to business and entrepreneurship. Thank you Rachel for teaching me what I wish someone had taught me in design school!”

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Alyak (I hope I'm saying that correctly), I wish someone had taught me this stuff in design school too! How much more successful would I have been if I'd known that I was an introvert back then? I can tell you that one of my biggest challenges in design school was the studio format. For those of you who don't know, design classes are taught in 3-hour blocks, most of which is self-guided. What that also means is that in this informal, creative setting there is a lot of chit chat among students, which makes it incredibly difficult for an introvert to achieve deep focus and accomplish anything during those three hours. I did the majority of my work at home, once class was over and I could concentrate. It kind of makes me wish I could go back to the school and advocate for the introverted students who need total silence to do their work!

That brings me to my topic for today, which is the bane of most introverts' existence: small talk. I'm currently reading *Introvert Power* by Dr. Laurie Helgoe, and she makes an excellent point that I think we all need to recognize and understand. In the book, she points out that "Introverts do not hate small talk because we dislike people. We hate small talk because we hate the barrier it creates between people." So, let's unpack that a little.

You've heard me say before that one characteristic of all introverted personality types in the Myers-Briggs system is that we want to create meaningful connections, rather than shallow ones. If a conversation never progresses beyond small talk, we feel as if we've been shut out and that we don't have a chance at creating a significant relationship. This is why many of us shudder at the idea of walking into a room full of people we don't know (hello, every networking event I've ever been to). It's not that we're shy or uninterested, it's that the hurdle of small talk stands in the way of us connecting with anyone.

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In owning a business, you'll be required to make small talk. It's just part of the territory, and you'll find that some people are easier to make small talk with than others – especially when you realize who in your world that you interact with on a regular basis is an extrovert and who is an introvert. We used to have a UPS delivery guy – Spike – who was the bright spot in our day. He made up nicknames for everyone in the office and joked around with us. Those 2-minute maximum exchanges are still some of my favorite memories. But I never got to know Spike beyond the fun banter and jokes because he was a total extrovert, going from one delivery to the next with surface (albeit fun) interaction. When I did try to engage him on a deeper level, I always felt like his responses were jokes, too. So my effort with him became to just accept the humor and fun he brought into the office and then go about my day.

Let's think about the instances during a regular day that you might be required to make small talk. For me, it starts with getting to the office in the morning and saying hello to everyone. If FedEx or UPS drops off a package, we might have to chit chat with them as well. My suite mate down the hall – also an introvert, thankfully – will sometimes come down and pop her head in for a quick second to say hello. Sometimes we talk a little bit, sometimes we don't. We both hate it when it has to stay surface level because we both need to get back to work. If my schedule includes consultations with new clients, there is quite a bit of small talk that happens in the early parts of those meetings. If we need to go to any showrooms, we often make small talk with the employees there, and sometimes if Emily (my right arm) is riding with me, we make small talk in the car on the way to appointments. On the phone, people expect some pleasantries to be exchanged before getting into the real reason for the call. Even emails require some finessing in the greeting before I jump right into the meaningful stuff.

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Most of us creative, introverted entrepreneurs are moving through our day without taking stock of how many of these exchanges we've participated in, and by 2:00, we're barely able to hold our eyes open, and we have another three hours before the day is technically done! Our creativity gets zapped, too, because we don't have the bandwidth to tap into it to produce anything we feel is worth sharing with our clients. In a nutshell, absorbing all of that chit chat wipes out our ability to tap into our intellect or creativity, and since our businesses are tied to both of them, we feel spent on days where our workload hasn't even really been that heavy.

What can be done to avoid feeling depleted when our society promotes and expects us to make small talk throughout our day, everyday?

It starts with understanding what your triggers are. A big trigger for me is for someone to say "how's business?" even though I understand that they are being polite and asking about something that they know is very important to me. I can appreciate their interest, while also wishing they hadn't asked. Why? Because the topic of "business" is waaaay too involved for me to answer in 10 seconds. And if you really want to know, I'll really tell you how it is. But you don't really want to know. And it will take an hour for me to tell you. Another trigger for me is "how was your weekend?" Again, this is a pleasantry, but it triggers me. Because the expected answer is one that provides a brief rundown of all activities engaged in over said weekend, most of which are minutiae. Maybe the biggest trigger for me – throughout my life – is when my mom says my name in the form of a question. "Rachel?" Usually because it indicates that she needs something and wants it right then, regardless of whether or not I'm able to stop what I'm doing and help her. (She does the bookkeeping at my office, so this happens a lot.)

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I think what it comes down to is that these kinds of questions typically pull me out of my inner world of thought, and at work, that inner world is hyper focused on making sense of my to-do list, organizing my thoughts, and tapping into my creativity. I'd much rather do those things than tell you my weekend consisted of discovering a new laundry detergent scent, doing the laundry, and discovering that I love Donut Shoppe Coconut Mocha flavored coffee.

If you can relate, then you also know that being on the receiving end of those details is every bit as tiring as being the one relaying them. It's not that I'm not interested, it's that...well, no I'm not gonna lie. I'm not interested. Maybe in the coffee detail but the other stuff, no.

So back to my question. How are we, as creative introverts, running businesses that require us to think deeply and tap into our imagination to do our best work, supposed to insulate ourselves from the waste of time that is small talk? This is the part of the podcast where I make a list, so go get your pen and paper ready.

Okay.

1. Sidestep small talk altogether and go deep/interesting, right off the bat.

I don't mean tell a depressing story, but be willing to talk about yourself in a way that you would with your besties. Someone asks "how was your weekend?" and you think back on it – most of which was a blur because it was so uneventful and not worth committing to memory – and zone in on the one thing that could be engaging. Remember that coconut mocha

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flavored coffee? Well, I did discover it last weekend, and I subscribed to have it shipped regularly from Amazon. So instead of answering “good” I can say “I discovered a new coffee flavor that’s life-changing to the point that I’m having it auto-shipped to my house every month until I die.” Which of course will prompt the question, “what is it?” and then we’ve avoided having to go down a rabbit hole where we compare details on laundry, trips to the grocery store, etc. Will you get some strange looks? Probably. But the trade-off is that you didn’t have to engage in any mundane conversation! That’s a win.

2. Be an open book.

Again, I’m not saying air your grievances or your baggage to total strangers, but find opportunities to open up about your reality. “How’s business?” is a good one. Everyone expects you to say “It’s great! We’re staying busy!” But what if instead of that, you said “The last few months have been a challenge because I’m introducing some new service offerings and we’ve been working on how to market them.” It’s likely to have one of two effects: one, they have no idea what that means and they just say “Oh good!” and change the subject; or two, they say “Wow, what kind of services?” and you now have an opportunity to spread the word about your business and possibly even make a connection or get a referral. Obviously, my advice to be an open book does not mean for you to lament the struggles of your life and business to anyone with ears – be careful of sharing too much information with the wrong people. But if someone asks about you or your business, share as much info as you can without becoming a me-monster (this is what all introverts dread most – becoming someone who talks incessantly about themselves, completely unaware that they’ve lost their audience). Highlight the future when small talk comes up – talk about what you’re working on, your plans, what you’re excited about.

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You'll give yourself a little pep talk in the process, and you'll test out your marketing!

3. Flip the script

This one will be challenging for us because it involves being curious about other people. My friend Mary Catherine has a gift for asking people about themselves without it coming off as nosy. I think because she is genuinely interested in learning about other people. No surprise, she's an extrovert. When I do it, it sounds like I'm interrogating people, so I typically avoid asking too many questions...and like I said, I'm not generally interested in hearing minutiae or gossip. Flipping the script is different. So someone asks "how was your weekend" and you're unprepared with a fun, interesting, or deep response, so you can reply with "Great! What was the best part of your weekend?" You've flipped the question on them, but you've asked for a specific piece of information. It might still be small talk, but you'll avoid that rundown of all the errands they ran, articles they saw on Facebook, etc.

So y'all, I think what this comes down to is: manipulation.

I'm kidding!! Kind of. The truth is that in order to eliminate small-talk, you have to get out in front of it and steer the conversation. ("Steer" is a nicer word than "manipulate.") You won't be able to avoid it altogether, so find ways you can dig deeper – without coming across as a psycho – and be charming, so that the people you interact with aren't trying to "get you to come out of your shell."

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If we're going to have to engage with people – and newsflash, we are – we need to make sure that our interaction is interesting and fresh so that it doesn't feel like a tax we have to pay for just being a person. Contrary to popular belief, nothing makes us introverts happier than when we discover something in common with someone else – especially something we're both passionate about. So rather than trying to give one or two word answers to these needling questions, we have to find ways to make them work for what WE need out of conversation. If we've taken the lead role in the exchange, we can decide when it's over, rather than being held hostage while our thoughts are derailed by a minute-by-minute recounting of last night's little league game.

So don't attempt to avoid it. Go deep, open up, and flip the script. This is going to allow you to get in and get out if you choose to, or, it might just open up a more meaningful conversation and you'll get what you want most – a real connection.

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