

## Significance of small talk in hospitality communication: Integrating it into education for prospective service personnel

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### Abstract

*In providing customer service excellence, communication is one of the key factors. As Blue and Harun [2003] suggest, hosts and guests' communication is often characterized as consisting of somewhat standardized dialogue. However, our previous research has indicated that informal conversations beyond standardized dialogue between hosts and guests are particularly significant. Therefore, in this study we focus on small talk between hosts and guests, it being one of a variety of aspects of communication. From interview data with 28 hotel employees on their interaction with guests, we investigated the function and significance of small talk. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. It was found that engaging in small talk with guests helps the staff to identify their wants and needs, and that staff think small talk is important in giving guests a sense of comfort and enjoyment. Additionally, staff intentionally use small talk to increase sales and to boost uptake of promotions. We believe these results are useful for hospitality education and would help prospective employees or tourism major students to improve their communication skills in order to offer excellent service.*

### Keywords

*small talk, hospitality, communication, customer satisfaction, human resource development*

### 1. Background

Hospitality worker shortage is a serious concern worldwide, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a publication by the World Travel & Tourism Council [Jus et al., 2022: 10], “staff shortage is a key issue for the Travel & Tourism sector,” and “the sector’s recovery and future growth are contingent on its ability to solve this issue.” The WTTC advocates development of and support for a skilled workforce to tackle this concern. Hospitality workers need to possess quality skills to offer hospitality that satisfies customers. Past studies have revealed that one of the most important requisite skills is communication [Johanson et al., 2011; Marneros et al., 2020; Rudd, 2005]. Communication between hosts and guests is one of the determining factors in customer satisfaction.

Regarding the key aspects of communication in hospitality service, Blue and Harun’s study [2003] is one of the few to focus on the use of language between hosts and guests. They use the term “hospitality language” for the language used in hotels and other hospitality settings. Through analyses of travel diaries and participant observation in hotels, they identified the characteristics of hospitality language. According to them, hospitality language is accompanied by attitudes of respect, is a bidirectional communication between hosts and guests, and has many routine elements; in addition, a cultural understanding and the ability to appropriately interact with other cultures are important. They also emphasize the fact that hospitality language is a form of business communication primarily aimed at achieving customer satisfaction.

Other articles on languages and hospitality, such as those by

Sirikhan and Prapphal [2011] or Fujita [2011], underscored the fact that a variety of communicative and pragmatic skills, such as the ability to perceive guest needs, the skill to actively engage in communication, and adaptability to different cultures, are required along with the language.

According to Fujita and Kaseda’s study [2022], communication for hospitality requires various attributes and abilities in the hospitality staff. Through interviews with hotel managers and staff, 18 communication competencies expected of hospitality workers were elicited. Among these items, they particularly discussed those that received many references from the interviewees. Two of them were “understanding and detecting guests’ needs” and “detecting needs and making suggestions.” According to Fujita and Kaseda, staff members try to discern guests’ needs by developing conversation. Another item was “special service practices.” They stated that staff come to understand guests’ preferences through conversations with them, which enables the staff to offer personalized service and experiences. Thus, conversation is particularly crucial for offering quality service. In Tanaka et al.’s study [2023], such communicative activity between guests and hosts undertaken to understand guests’ needs was expressed as small talk. Although language in hospitality service has a set framework of standardized dialogue and patterns [Blue and Harun, 2003], small talk goes beyond this framework.

Small talk is often considered as a “mere exchange of words,” as put by Malinowski [1923, as cited in Coupland, 2014]. In keeping with this characterization, the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines small talk as “conversation about things that are not important, often between people who do not know each other well.”<sup>(1)</sup> However, in recent years, small talk has started to become the focus of sociolinguistic research. Coupland [2014] argues that small talk at work plays significant

roles in creating relational functions among workers, and that the resulting rapport would be beneficial for attaining institutional goals. Likewise, the authors of the present work consider small talk as more than trivial chitchat and assume that its role in creating relational functions applies to host–guest encounters and the consequent attainment of the institutional goals of customer satisfaction. Hence, we aim to investigate the following research questions:

- What are the functions of small talk in hospitality communication?
- What aspects of small talk can be taught in an educational program for current and prospective hospitality workers?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Original project

This research is part of a larger project aimed at extracting the essential elements of hospitality communication.<sup>(2)</sup> In that project, we interviewed hospitality employees working in the accommodation industry and created a can-do list for hospitality communication. Our interviews primarily focused on employees in charge of customer service in first-class and luxury-level hotels. Some of them were managers at Japanese-style ryokans.<sup>(3)</sup> We used semistructured interviews to identify what they considered important in host–guest communication. We prepared the questions following the arrival-and-departure flow suggested by Blue and Harun [2003], and attempted to extract the communication elements throughout this flow. At each situation point during the arrival, stay, and then the departure, we asked about the verbal and nonverbal communication activities demonstrated between the staff and guests. Then, we followed up with more in-depth questions to obtain more details. The data were collected over a four-year period (2019–2022). In the process, we came to notice the significance of small talk, which was frequently mentioned by the interviewees. Hence, we found it necessary to elicit this important aspect of communication from the wider project findings and investigate it in more detail.

### 2.2 Focus on small talk

In this study, we focused solely on the aspects of small talk. We conducted a thorough review of the interview data, specifically examining references to small talk. All 23 interviews with the 28 hospitality managers and staff<sup>(4)</sup> included elements related to small talk. All the parts of the interview associated with small talk were recorded in an Excel sheet; the total number of references to small talk was 123. The authors conducted a thematic analysis [Terry and Hayfield, 2021] to investigate these elements. During the process, the authors collaborated in the creation of codes through repeated discussions.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Codes for small talk roles

The data analysis showed that small talk plays specific roles

Table 1: Codes; small talk roles

Codes: Small talk roles	No. of references
(1) Learning about the guests for better service (Subcodes) [1] common topics [2] approach & delivery [3] skills & preparation	48
(2) Providing guests a sense of enjoyment and comfort	28
(3) Sales and promotion	13

in host–guest communication. Analysis of the references led to the formulation of three codes related to the roles of small talk: (1) *Learning about the guests for better service*, (2) *Providing guests a sense of enjoyment and comfort*, and (3) *Sales and promotion*. Table 1 displays these roles and the number of references recorded for each role.

### 3.2 Learning about the guests for better service

The first code, *learning about the guests for better service*, had 48 references. In addition, the data analysis showed that this code could be divided into three subcodes: [1] common small talk topics, [2] ways to approach the guests for small talk/ways to deliver small talk, and [3] skills and preparation for small talk.

Hotel staff tried to elicit further information through conversations to find out about the guests' needs in order to provide better service. The following items are some of the references that cast small talk as a means of learning about guests with the aim of providing better service. Some data specifically described interactions between the host and international guests. The bracketed numerals after each sentence indicate the relevant subcodes:

- Staff provide extra information for international guests. For example, they explain about train/subway congestion during rush hour or the difficulties in carrying large suitcases on public transport. [1], [3]
- Staff prepare for simple questions about Japanese culture and customs, such as what Japanese people eat for breakfast or the difference between a shrine and a temple. [1], [3]
- When hotel staff are asked a question by the guests, they try to find out more about the purpose of the visit, and then make suggestions. [1], [2]
- Even when outward appearances convey something obvious, such as the guest looking angry, staff try to listen to guests well and get to know their true intentions. [2]
- At dining times, when staff come to the guests to pour wine, they initiate small talk and ask about how they are enjoying the food. [2]
- Staff try to learn about the background of international guests, such as their religious practices—for example, whether there are fasting practices or specific days when people need to avoid touching electrical appliances in ac-

cordance with religious doctrines. [3]

- Staff research events suitable for international guests or popular-brand shops and provide such information during small talk. [3]

### 3.3 Providing guests a sense of enjoyment and comfort

The second code, *providing guests a sense of enjoyment and comfort*, had 28 references. Below are some of the references from the data that point out this function of small talk:

- Staff pay attention to their tone conveyed through words and voice and to the volume of their voice.
- Staff speak gently and with kindness; the use of honorifics is a secondary concern.
- Staff try to talk in a way that eases guests' tension. Humor is also important.
- Some guests do not welcome conversations with staff, and so staff carefully observe guests' mood.
- If the guests look tense because they are not familiar with staying at a hotel, then small talk can help them relax.
- When hearing guests express their feelings during conversation, staff try to make appropriate responses/comments and invite them to come back to talk to the staff again so that they can help guests enjoy their stay.
- If staff find out that it is the guest's birthday or that they are coming to the hotel to celebrate passing a test, then they offer special services, such as preparing a dessert plate or festive red rice to make the guest happy.
- It is not uncommon for the staff-guest relationship to develop into addressing each other by first names, hugging, and so on.

### 3.4 Sales and promotion

The third code involves *sales and promotion*. Some references describe initiating small talk as a means of increasing sales and boosting uptake of promotions. The data showed that staff try to sell services or products or encourage guests to upgrade and spend more. The following items are examples of references in this code:

- If the guest is staying for a special purpose, such as a marriage proposal or birthday celebration, staff recommend a room of a higher grade or a bottle of wine accordingly.
- If staff know that the guest likes Japanese cuisine, then they also recommend different Japanese restaurants in the hotel.
- When guests leave, staff ask about their stay and introduce upcoming events scheduled at the hotel and encourage them to make a return visit.
- It is important not to make the guest feel that service or products are being pushed through upselling talk.
- Establish a good relationship with the guest through small talk and then start upselling.
- If staff find out that the guest likes Japanese sake, then they recommend a good sake shop in the local area.

### 3.5 Other notable aspects of small talk

Other than the roles of small talk presented so far, there were various references concerning other different aspects of small talk. Several were related to the points to be kept in mind when carrying on small talk. Below are examples of such references:

- To remember guests' faces and names and to talk to them
- To gather as much information as possible
- To ask open-ended questions
- To refrain from asking personal questions in the beginning
- Some people want to talk, but some do not.
- To avoid silence, prepare small talk topics to draw on when needed.

Several points were related to scenes or situations in which small talk is frequently performed, such as check-in, escorting guests, dining, and check-out. The following are some such examples:

- During check-in, among the general topics discussed are guests' travel plans, experiences, or purpose of visit. Through small talk, staff can get to know the guest and adjust their responses. For example, if the guest is busy, staff keep the conversation quick and short.
- Some hotels' staff escort guests to their rooms, and then they engage in small talk in the elevator.
- When the guest is dining, staff confirm whether it is a special occasion, such as a birthday or anniversary.
- When checking out, among the general topics discussed are the guests' impressions of the stay, any satisfactory/unsatisfactory experiences during the stay, and transportation information. If there is a need, staff arrange transportation for the departing guest.

### 3.6 In the case of Japanese ryokans

The analysis also revealed the uniqueness of the role of small talk at Japanese ryokans. Japanese ryokans are different from Western-style hotels in that both breakfast and dinner are served in most places, and most of them are equipped with spas (built over onsen hot springs), so the guests tend to stay for a longer duration in these inns, also spending more of their stay on the premises than they would at a regular hotel. Below are some examples of references made by ryokan staff:

- A longer time is spent with each guest from arrival to send-off.
- Ryokans provide more opportunities to talk with guests (compared to hotels) because of the greater number of occasions on which food is served.
- Instead of just saying "Here is today's \_\_\_," the value of the dish can be increased by adding a few words such as "This is a \_\_\_ from where it was picked today," "This is very fresh," or "This is the only time of year you can eat this."
- In ryokans' guest service communication, every word is im-

portant.

- As an extension to providing the necessary information to the guest, turn the conversation to something else.
- It is difficult to draw a line between what is and is not small talk.
- Many people who stay at ryokans come for the pleasure of talking with the staff and waitresses.
- Even if a guest talks to staff when he/she is busy with his/her work, it is good guest service to speak pleasantly with the guest, not coldly.
- Small talk is so important that it can be said that most of what comprises guest service is small talk.
- Staff are always looking for topics that will capture the guests' hearts and minds, and they must be observant.
- What is important in a ryokan is communication from the moment of welcoming guests to the moment of seeing them off.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 Functions of small talk

Among the codes of small talk roles in our data, the most frequent reference was to *learning about the guests for better service*, which includes the three sub-codes, namely [1] *common topics*, [2] *approach & delivery*, and [3] *skills & preparation*, as shown in Table 1. As for subcode [1], *common topics*, such things as plans during the stay and guest experience at the hotel were frequent subjects. These topics help staff to anticipate what expectations guests might have. When hotel staff are asked a question by the guests, they not only respond with answers to the question but also try to see if the guest has some other needs and then make some further suggestions pertaining to those needs, whenever applicable. Past research has pointed out that meeting the expectations and needs of guests is the key issue for service quality [Langevin, 1988]. When the expectation is met, the service is perceived as satisfactory [O'Neill, 2010]. The second subcode, *approach & delivery*, suggests that staff consciously and proactively engage in conversation with guests. For instance, they initiate talk with suitable timing at the dining table. The third subcode, *skills & preparation*, demonstrated the importance of constantly making preparations for effective interactions. Staff always pay attention to useful and up-to-date information to give guests so that they are ready to pass on this information in a timely manner.

The next most frequently referred to code is *providing the guests a sense of enjoyment and comfort*. The interaction with staff can encourage guests who are on vacation or away from home to experience something different. Gremler and Gwinner [2000] note that an enjoyable interaction with a service provider creates rapport and a personal connection between the two interactants. Our data indicate that staff talking to guests in a kind manner helps them feel at home or relaxed. Staff even arrange for the celebration of occasions such as guest birthdays or anniversaries whenever the staff find out about these dates. Occasionally, they develop special relationships with guests

and call them by their first names. Results also show that humor plays an important role. Humor would assist staff and guests in having good relationships by easing the tension between them. These enjoyable experiences bring guests positive emotions in connection with the service, and positive emotions have a significant impact on customer satisfaction [Liljander and Strandvik, 1997].

The third code, *sales and promotion*, indicates that hotel staff consider small talk an essential tool for upselling or promoting sales. In other words, staff proffer suggestions that encourage guests to purchase more in the course of conducting small talk. It is a way to find out if the guests have the capacity or potential reasons to upgrade the room or buy something extra. This function is distinct from the other two codes in that it has the clear purpose of seeking profit directly, and it may not intersect with guests' satisfaction—it is business-focused, not guest-focused. Yet, the function of small talk here, as mentioned by one of the interviewees, is establishing a good relationship with the guests before embarking on any sales-related talk.

##### 4.2 Small talk at Japanese ryokans

The study also reveals some interesting insights into the differences between a Western-style hotel and a Japanese-style ryokan. The ryokan staff members tend to spend a longer time interacting with guests, from arrival to seeing them off. They have more opportunities to talk with customers (compared to hotels), as most ryokans serve dinner and breakfast. They thus can talk about local stories and ingredients when serving meals. The examples of references made by ryokan staff (see section 3.6) strongly suggest the effectiveness of small talk. Because of such features, ryokan staff tend to have more opportunities to add extra value to their services by using small talk to full effect.

##### 4.3 Small talk and customer satisfaction

Whether in Western hotels or Japanese ryokans, the goals are customer satisfaction, and small talk is a necessary tool for accomplishing this goal. Among the functions of small talk revealed in this study, the first and second codes described in section 4.1 are important for customer satisfaction. Using small talk effectively helps staff to understand customers' thoughts and feelings, and when their needs are met, that experience leaves the customers with positive emotions. In addition, the pleasant personal interactions bring customers a further sense of enjoyment and comfort. Ultimately, this will affect customers' perceptions of their satisfaction with the service or experience. Therefore, ability to engage in small talk should be considered as one of the essential skills for service providers to acquire.

##### 4.4 Educational implications

Hospitality is an ability that can be brought out through awareness [Abe, 2010; Nakai, 2015]. Personnel working in the

hospitality industry should be familiar with the functions of small talk in making their business more effective and successful. From the interview data, we were able to collect scores of references that would be useful for prospective hospitality personnel training.

It would be beneficial to include the following elements in the training: (1) common topics, (2) approach and delivery, and (3) skills and preparation. As for the topics, such matters as travel plans, the weather, or the purpose of the stay are common conversation starters at check-in. When checking out, the guests' impressions of and experiences during the stay are suitable general topics. In addition, cultural matters and transportation systems are often important topics.

The optimal ways to approach guests and deliver small talk is another important element to include in education. Staff need to pay attention to the use of paralanguage, such as a soft tone of voice and smiling while speaking. To underpin their ability to engage in effective small talk, it is useful for prospective staff to know some tips for engaging in small talk. As listed in the Results section, asking open-ended questions or avoiding personal questions at the beginning are some examples.

Finally, acquiring the skills and knowledge to interact with guests is necessary; for this purpose, the staff are required to constantly prepare fresh information for guests pertaining to the wider location or culture outside the immediate confines of the hotel. For international guests, in particular, staff need to be prepared to answer simple questions pertaining to local culture and customs.

These important elements will need to be incorporated into the human resources programs engaged in service delivery in the hospitality industry.

## 5. Conclusion and further study

Our study has investigated two research questions: (1) What are the functions of small talk in hospitality communication? and (2) What can be taught to potential service personnel about small talk? The study revealed several functions of small talk essential for hospitality services. In many situations, service staff members work with small talk in ways that can influence guests' satisfaction. In other words, small talk plays an important role in offering hospitable service.

Owing to the serious current staff shortage in the hospitality industry worldwide, the industry has witnessed a recent emergence of robots and digital screens being deployed to take over the roles traditionally carried out by hospitality personnel. Yet, as demonstrated in this study, connecting with and understanding guests through conversation and creating rapport can best be carried out by people, and is not easily replaceable by AI [Prentice et al., 2020]. Consequently, it becomes imperative to develop personnel with strong communication skills, as they play a vital role in achieving heightened customer satisfaction. Therefore, explicitly educating prospective staff on the mechanisms of small talk in customer service will ensure better guest experiences.

The findings of the present study hold the potential to contribute significantly to the cultivation of proficient hospitality staff. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the outcomes could have been even more substantial if the research were designed exclusively on the features of small talk from the start. As mentioned in the Methods section, this study stems from a larger project that investigated hospitality communication in general. Consequently, our forthcoming study shall exclusively focus on aspects of small talk, with an emphasis on relational functions in the interactions between hosts and guests.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants in this study for their cooperation. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 20H04441.

The authors would also like to thank the JGTR Editorial Board for their kind assistance in the publication of this article.

## Notes

<sup>(1)</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary* (online version), retrieved August 8, 2023 from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/>.

<sup>(2)</sup> This three-year (2020–2022) project, “Toward Creating a Can-Do List for Hospitality Communication,” was supported by the JSPS (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science) KAKENHI Grant Number 20H04441. The Can-Do List is presented in: Fujita, R., Kaseda, H., Tanaka, N., Nakai, N., Hayashi, C., & Morikoshi, K. [2023], *Compilation of JSPS KAKENHI-supported research report: Developing assessment tools for hospitality communication competency*, Nishiooka Sogo Publishing.

<sup>(3)</sup> Ryokans are Japanese inns often found in hot spring resort areas. Ryokans offer traditional Japanese service and lifestyles.

<sup>(4)</sup> These consisted of 14 hotel managers, 7 hotel staff members, and 7 ryokan managers and staff members.

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Received August 31, 2023

Revised November 4, 2023

Accepted November 9, 2023

Published November 30, 2023

 [https://doi.org/10.37020/jgtr.8.2\\_151](https://doi.org/10.37020/jgtr.8.2_151)