

HOW TO TALK TO STRANGERS

After a few years of saying hello to people, we decided to write down a few thoughts we've had on talking to strangers, whether you're about to hop on the train wearing a "talk to me" sign or not. It's just a list of basic ideas that we've discovered about what works, and what doesn't, when we're saying hello to someone new - particularly in public.

1. Don't have an agenda - and don't let other people's have an agenda either. This is *the* most important thing.

2. Find a good location. Plenty of pedestrian traffic. A wide cross-section of people. A bench to sit down on. (Note: areas that are traditionally touristy can be harder. Locals will think you're a tourist and tourists will ask you where the nearest public bathroom is. A lot.) There's also an endless array of events and gatherings if you just look around. Check out the chamber of commerce, the newspaper, or any community calendar.

3. If you dress up too much, people will think you're a Mormon. If you look too messy, people will think you're a bum. Try not to wear slogans or logos of any sort.

4. Make eye contact first, then say hello.

5. Prepare for doubt. 99% doubt. If people say, "what's this about?" say, "you tell me!" If people ask, "why?" say, "why not?" People will swear that you're proselytizing, selling, researching, doing a documentary, or marketing a new product. The silver lining is that most people's doubts of you only reflect their own mindset. Most college students will think you're researching, most lonely people will think you're lonely, etc.

6. You never know who will walk up to you, so don't make assumptions about who you think a given person is. This is harder than it sounds.

7. Ask good questions. Especially questions you don't know the answer to.

8. Never take money.

9. Bring others in. Introduce people to each other. Make it a chat room.

10. Friday nights are different than Monday mornings. If it's a weekend evening, get ready to talk about relationships. If it's a weekday morning, good luck talking before noon, unless you're at: the breakfast rush at the local diner, the senior citizens center, or the dog walk in the park.

11. Have a good debate without being divisive. Be neutral without being stale. Find life stories underneath opinions. Find out how people arrived at their opinions.

12. Mix it up. If people are chronically serious, be silly. If people are chronically silly, be a little serious.

13. There are three major red flags when it comes to talking to strangers: 1) People who talk at, not talk with. 2) Verbal diarrhea. 3) People who take over the sign and turn it into their own soapbox towards passersby. This will take extra effort from you to handle. Just trust your internal BS detector, and be assertive.

14. One of the hardest parts of "Talk To Me" is deciding what to do when you're not in an engaging conversation. There's no single way to spot this other than the fact that you feel drained and you want to get out. This usually happens when someone comes up and has an endless, perhaps even irrational monologue. If you are getting bored, take a deep breath at the next conversational pause and redirect the conversation with a new question, even a challenging question. Usually this works. If the person has definite boundary problems and has spent 30 minutes repeating why he/she likes to use fabric softener to spice up their oatmeal cookies, simply try to shake their hand, and say, "Great to meet you." At the last resort, you can simply pack up the sign and take a lunch break.

15. Don't be an expert. Just be resourceful. Make connections. Introduce neighbors to each other. If someone's looking for a clarinet teacher, and you just met a clarinet teacher, pass their card on. If someone's looking for a pro-bono immigration lawyer, find a phone book. Ask around.

16. Give ideas, not advice.

17. Most of all, if you have a "Talk To Me" sign, you should try to spend more time listening than talking.

Got questions or comments? Drop us a line @

www.TalkToMe.org