

Conversation with an Expat

By: Robin Pascoe

A group of bored expatriates, looking for an entertaining diversion and a way for expats to meet new people, decided to stage a contest to see who could hold a conversation with a stranger the longest without thinking.

They took out a full page ad in the local English-language paper advertising the 'Automatic Pilot Conversation' contest. Competitors need only bring their mouths.

To ensure the contest had some semblance of order, an organizing committee was struck by the originators to establish a few rules. The committee also needed to seek out a local sponsor to provide an appropriate prize for the best talker.

After an hour's discussion, in which nobody on the committee could actually recall what was said, it was more or less decided that the rules should be kept simple.

The selection of a prize took less than a minute to agree upon. A cellular phone company would be approached to donate one of its latest models.

On the day of the competition, hundreds of expats turned up at the local club to participate. There was a deafening silence as the crowd stood milling around the sign up sheets.

One of the judges mingling in the crowd queried a potential contestant as to why his mouth was so firmly shut.

"I don't want to waste any pointless conversation until I have to," came the reply.

The silence continued despite the growing number of would-be talkers. The organizing committee retreated to a private room to ask themselves if they had done the right thing.

"How can people meet one another if they won't open their mouths?" asked one of the younger judges.

"Well... " an older man on the committee began, "...they are looking at one another even if they aren't speaking. That's a start I suppose."

"I think we made a mistake," said a third judge. "Even when they speak to one another, it's going to be about trivialities."

"I thought that was the point of the contest," another committee member piped up.

"I don't get it anyway," said the young judge. "Everybody out there already has a cell phone."

The judges ran out of conversation. It was time to start the contest.

"So how long have you been here?" asked the first contestant.

"Where do you work?" asked another.

"Do you like your living accommodations?"

“How many children do you have?”

“Isn’t the school something else?”

“Have you travelled since you came here?”

“What have you bought?”

“Do you know what that would cost at home?”

And so it went on and on. Clearly, nobody was thinking about their conversations. Everyone qualified as potential winners. The judges, meanwhile, yawned openly. There was no apparent relief in sight. People were still coming through the doors of the club.

“This contest was definitely a mistake,” the judges agreed in unison when they retreated to a private room to contemplate their failure.

“So what do we do now? How can we salvage this mess?”

Nobody spoke. But one person in the room was actually thinking.

“I have a suggestion,” a diplomatic wife said quietly. None of the other judges had spoken to her. In fact, none of them had asked for her name. They all assumed she was matched to someone in the room. “We’ll announce the contest was really a cover story for research for a book one of us is writing.”

“But none of us are writers.”

“Well, actually, I am,” explained the diplomatic wife. “You didn’t know this because none of you has spoken to me or asked me any questions, pointless or otherwise.”

“How do you suggest we handle it?” a judge finally asked, breaking the silence that was less deadening and more embarrassing.

“I’ll announce that all conversation is being noted for a book I’m writing. Then, I’ll thank them for their participation and we’ll raffle off the cell phone.”

“But what kind of book could you possibly be researching at an ‘Automatic Pilot Conversation’ contest?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asked, smiling widely.

The judges were not thinking at all.

“The ‘Expat Phrase Book’ of course.”

Nobody could think of a thing to say.

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