

BOOKS

Sweat the small stuff and you'll be poised to succeed

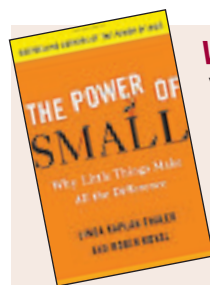
BY MATTHEW CROWLEY

Remember the stuck-in-line chat you had with the person behind you at the post office? How about your last conversation with the barista at Starbucks? Have you greeted your neighbor or your office manager today? Perhaps you should. If you want to be better at business, a pair of authors argues, little chats matter.

In "The Power of Small: Why Little Things Make All the Difference" authors Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval show the power of fleeting moments. The authors, who run the Kaplan Thaler advertising agency in New York and who combined to write 2006 best-seller "The Power of Nice: How to Conquer the Business World With Kindness," argue that we miss big cracks at success by ignoring the subtle and small.

Thinking small starts with talking small, with our mouths and voices, Thaler and Koval argue. E-mailing, texting and Twittering, they argue, keep people at a distance, and distance damages. The American Psychological Association notes that social phobia has become the third-most common mental illness in America, affecting 13 percent of residents.

"The era of the Internet and e-mail has further compounded this tendency to

**Well Read**

"The Power of Small: Why Little Things Make All the Difference" by Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval, 160 pages, Broadway Business, \$17.95.

retreat into silence, transforming our daily conversations into sterile, digitized bytes that stream anonymously across the Web," the authors write. "As Studs Terkel said, 'We are more into communications and less into communication.'"

LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook and other social networking sites have given us lists of "friends" we'll never see or talk to, the authors say. Kaplan and Thaler quote a New York Times account likening these sites' profile pages to an endless cocktail party at which a trail of virtual Post-it notes ("I was here") marks guests' comings and goings.

Shy people may hate talking small, but Koval and Thaler say little conversations add texture to human interaction and grease success. In his career tracking master's of business administration students, for example, Stanford University professor Thomas Harrell, found that the

most socially adept students, not the ones with the best grades, generally landed the most prestigious, lucrative jobs.

And, they note, law firm Sullivan & Cromwell became the top-rated New York law firm in rankings by The American Lawyer partly by encouraging chatter. Senior partners would talk with junior colleagues in the halls and over lunch, praise them for good work and ask them (not order them) to stay for late meetings.

Simple talk brings business, the authors say. A jet-leasing company exec landed a client by forfeiting a diner seat to, and chatting with, a man whose company wanted to lease a jet. Kindly redirecting a movie-times-seeking wrong number landed a small-business owner a phone-etiquette-training account from the errant caller.

Watching little details can invite success, the authors say. In a crowded job market, sending a thank you on paper may put you ahead of someone who e-mails one. Remembering to meet speakers' eyes at meetings signals that you're listening and not merely waiting to respond.

Detail-mindfulness can also prevent disaster. A circus performer, they write, errantly used a damp sandbag, instead of a dry one, to test a cannon for the human cannonball trick. The wetness meant the

cannon was miscalibrated for weight; the man was lighter than the tested bag. He shot from the cannon, sailed past the landing cushion and crashed into a concrete floor, never to perform, or walk, again. In the 1930s, they write, a nervous newspaper editor in Colorado misunderstood an Associated Press teletype that promised: "will overhead Indy 500 winner." The editor wrote and ran a story saying that Will Overhead had won the race. (Self-publishing bloggers take note: that fellow could have used a copydesk.)

"The Power of Small" lives up to its name, being small (160 pages) and powerful (packed with random moments of compassion and inspiration). It talks to readers, not past or over them, in everyday language. And it entertains. By turning the don't-sweat-the-small-stuff argument on its head, Koval and Thaler remind us that delight lies in details.

"Focusing on the tiniest details of the work we love, finding magic in even the smallest inspirations, embracing the briefest moments — that's where the passion is."

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