

**Harvard
Business
Review****Communication****How to Network with Powerful People**

by Michael C. Wenderoth

December 16, 2019



Illustration by Enisaurus

Summary. Networking with influential, high-level executives can be hard. They are usually very busy and slow to reply messages. Being referred by a respectful figure in the industry will strengthen your approach. Look up person you want to

connect with and see what you... [more](#)

Leer en español

Ascend

Job and life advice for young professionals. See more from Ascend here.

After two years working at a multinational, Alex* was ready for a job change and knew networking was critical to make that happen. But his efforts — reaching out to executives inside and outside his company — had resulted in zero opportunities or meetings. More worrisome, barely anyone had even bothered to respond.

Alex was doing great work and had strong credentials, so his resume wasn't the problem. He was targeting influential, high-level executives, but the response rate was poor.

When we analyzed his emails and LinkedIn requests, we quickly found the issue: his approach and his wording. His previous 20 inquiries read: “Dear [Name], I am looking for a new job and would love to get your thoughts over a coffee. Do you have an hour we can meet?”

How do you get the attention of powerful people you want in your network, but are the least likely to respond? Senior executives are busy, see less value spending time with someone lower on the hierarchy, and are likely to miss or ignore requests through email or social media.

I turned the tables on Alex: How would he respond to a similar request from someone younger, that he did not know well? If he received 20 requests, which would he respond to, and which person would he meet?

Putting Alex through this reflection exercise helped him — and numerous students and professionals I coach — better identify the strategies that secure important meetings. Alex ultimately identified five approaches, which are backed by the social science on what leads others to respond and help us. Used strategically, they can also help you.

Come Recommended

Alex thought back to the university students who contacted him last year, and sheepishly admitted that he blew off the majority of them.

“The one I immediately responded to was a student that my CEO said I should meet.”

Lesson: The best way to secure a meeting is to come recommended by a respected figure in your industry. Having friends in high places can move you to the top of the queue, and even positively impact your salary.

In Practice: Coming recommended can be tricky if you aren't close to someone influential, but when we carefully examine our networks, most of us can identify a few powerful ties. Ask someone influential to put in a good word for you, introduce you, or help arrange a meeting with the person you want to meet.

Alex's team contracted a consultancy the year before, and he had impressed the consultancy's partner during the engagement. The partner had a wide network of senior contacts at other companies, so

Alex asked if the partner could introduce him to a vice president he wanted to meet. The partner was happy to do so, and also recommended him to two other executives.

Play Up Your Similarities

Alex boasted that he always helps people from his university, or who studied in the school's economics department.

“I help alumni.”

Lesson: We gravitate and help those similar to us. Common ties extend beyond school. Coming from the same hometown, rooting for the same sports team, sharing unique backgrounds (like being a female engineer in marketing or having studied a non-traditional degree), even having the same name or birthday immediately warms people up to each other.

In Practice: Do your homework to refine your pitch. Use LinkedIn or Google to research the people you want to meet. Weave similarities you share into your request.

Alex re-visited his list and was surprised to learn that five executives he'd been wanting to connect with hailed from his hometown in Philadelphia. He rewrote his e-mail, adding: “I noticed you are also from Philadelphia (I grew up outside Drexel Hill), so I imagine you, like me, are still celebrating our long-awaited 2018 Super Bowl victory!”

Bring Value

Alex responded to an engineer who contacted him, mainly because of her focus on artificial intelligence.

“I thought maybe she knows more about AI than me, and I could learn something.”

Lesson: If you have information, skills or insights that could be helpful to the person you want to meet, you are more likely to stand out.

In Practice: Highlighting unique skills may be easier for senior professionals, but students can capitalize on their course work or familiarity with emerging technologies. Consider what your target might be interested in or need help with. Play up unique knowledge you may have, framing how that might benefit the person, and highlight credentials, like affiliations with prestigious institutions, that give you credibility. But don't write a thesis — drop hints to pique their interest.

Alex realized his work on a social media campaign to generate offline sales was a compelling story for retail executives, so he highlighted how he had “boosted in-store sales 75% through new media.” Alex asked an executive if they could meet so Alex “could get the executive's C-suite perspective and advice on how I might use this skill to help retailers, as I take the next step in my career.”

Use Flattery

One student employed none of the approaches above, but Alex still responded.

He was embarrassed: “This guy kissed my butt and told me how awesome I was.”

Lesson learned: The old joke goes that flattery has a law of diminishing returns — but no one has found where it drops off! Tap into the ego. We like people who make us feel good about ourselves,

and we find these people more credible.

In Practice: No one wants to be a “brown noser,” but there is good evidence that ingratiating behavior works. To combat our resistance to using flattery, especially the belief that it won’t work across cultures, think about flattery as making the other person feel good about themselves. For example, the very act of seeking someone’s sage expertise and advice is a form of flattery. A German executive highlighted key points he liked from the speech of a vice president in another division. The “flattery” was sincere. He secured a coffee meeting and started a relationship that accelerated his career.

Alex revised his generic emails to highlight something specific about each person: “I really appreciated the point you made in your televised interview last week – it made me rethink how I view online privacy.”

Ask and Be Persistent

For every one person that reached out to Alex the past year, there were two people who did not. Most people are too embarrassed to ask, or feel that reaching out won’t get a response.

Lesson: The odds of getting a response might *feel* low, but research shows we significantly underestimate the willingness of others to help us — *by more than 50%*. When I asked a senior executive why he respond to younger people, he echoed a common refrain: “They simply asked and followed up ... most people don’t. I find it very hard to say no to a sincere, well thought-out request, especially when it is about something concrete and simple, like making an introduction.”

In Practice: Ask and ye shall receive — more than you think you will. Or ask yourself: What do I have to lose by asking? Most busy and senior people are not thinking about you, and can't read your mind. Use the approaches above to make a request more compelling, and make requests in person, which are even harder to turn down.

Put it All Together

The market is more competitive than ever. Most jobs are found through connections, and networking has been shown to have a strong impact on career success. But to build that network, you first need to make contact.

After we debriefed, Alex revised his requests. He wrote crisp, to-the-point inquiries, employing or combining the approaches above. That took some thought, but relatively little time, and he immediately tripled his response rate. Every few months Alex sharpens his approach, based on what's working.

Follow Alex's lead. You'll land more meetings, which will lead to more conversations, which will build your network, and advance your career.

**All names and identifying details have been changed*

MW

Michael C. Wenderoth is an Associate Professor at IE Business School in Madrid and an executive coach. He teaches and writes on China, sales, and leadership.