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How to Cold Call Your Future Mentor

You can get a meeting with an influential person you have never met by doing research ahead of time, showing hustle and remembering to ask, 'What can I do for you in return?'



Getting that first meeting with an in-demand executive or potential mentor can change the course of a person's career. But how do you break through with someone you've never met before? *PHOTO: ISTOCK*



By

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Getting a meeting with an influential person you admire actually could change your life, by opening doors and providing inspiration or advice.

But how do you connect with a total stranger who is in demand and make that

person want to meet with you? Pulling off the career equivalent of a moon landing requires a first contact that is pitch-perfect: the perfect subject line, a winning introduction, a request that isn't too big or vague, and—a subtle touch that's often overlooked—a hint of what you can offer in return.

Most people reach out by email, and these emails are often swiftly deleted, experts and executives say. Often, the sender is asking for too much time—even an hour is usually too long—or too much commitment, such as saying outright, “Will you help me get a job?” Unfocused requests for pointless conversations, such as asking about the recipient's accomplishments or background, also tend to land straight in the trash.

That first email should show that the sender is well informed and prepared for a purposeful discussion. Give a succinct summary of who you are, what you want to accomplish, what you are asking for and if possible, something you can offer.



Ali Ethier, with her father Dennis at her college graduation in May. She emailed Paul McDonald to ask for career help, saying, "I understand that you are a very busy person, but if you find time to speak with me I would greatly appreciate it." Mr. McDonald, a senior staffing-firm executive, responded warmly, saying her email showed she had done her homework. *PHOTOS: ETHIER FAMILY; QUENTIN BACON, SAN FRANCISCO*

College senior Ali Ethier was hoping Paul McDonald would open doors for her when she emailed him last year to ask for a meeting. Ms. Ethier learned on LinkedIn that Mr. McDonald was an alumni and trustee of her school, St. Bonaventure University, in Allegany, N.Y., and a senior executive director at the staffing firm Robert Half International Inc., where he places professionals in her field.

In a succinct 200-word message, Ms. Ethier introduced herself, said she was interested in a career as a credit analyst and politely requested his advice, adding, "I understand that you are a very busy person, but if you find time to speak with me I would greatly appreciate it."

Mr. McDonald agreed, he says, partly because Ms. Ethier had done her

homework and showed respect for his time. They set a video call, and Ms. Ethier booked a conference room at the university, prepared notes on questions to ask and dressed in a suit for the call, as if she were going to a job interview. “She was extremely professional,” says Mr. McDonald, who introduced her to several contacts and offered advice on her resume, suggesting she highlight certain coursework. His assistance helped her land her a job last May as a trainee at a financial-services company.

Put effort into a “killer subject line” for your introductory email, advises Kathryn Minshew, chief executive of the Muse, a career-development website in New York City. Research the expert’s background, interests and past employers and schools; pay attention to his or her speeches, writings and social-media activity. An attention-grabbing subject line might name a shared contact, school or interest, such as, “Fellow alum from UVA who loves technology.” Or pass on a compliment, Ms. Minshew suggests. “Your recent article on AI blew me away.”

Shahzil Amin, founder and CEO of Blue Track Media, a Philadelphia online-marketing company, was eager to meet Nihal Mehta, an entrepreneur and investor in mobile technology. “I genuinely wanted his advice on how I could get to his level,” Mr. Amin said. He knew Mr. Mehta was active on Twitter, so his first contact was a tweet asking him for his contact information.

Mr. Mehta, founding general partner of Eniac Ventures, in New York, said Mr. Amin’s Twitter profile interested him, and he gave Mr. Amin his email address. “Reaching out on Twitter cold embodies hustle, which I admire,” Mr. Mehta said. Mr. Amin wrote explaining that he’d founded his company at age 18, asking for Mr. Mehta’s advice and offering to reciprocate by doing work for him or helping him in any way he could. The two have been meeting quarterly for several years to discuss business, says Mr. Amin, who is now also a managing partner at Karlani Capital, a Philadelphia investment firm that bought Blue Track Media in 2014. Mr. Mehta says, “I’ve learned a ton and watched Shaz grow and blossom.”

Find out what’s important to the executive before you ask to meet, says Susan Packard, author of “New Rules of the Game.” As a senior executive at a media company, Ms. Packard agreed to meet with a young manager she didn’t know



Entrepreneur Shaz Amin emailed investor Nihal Mehta to ask for his advice, adding, "I would be very humbled if you decided to give me a chance to prove that I can be an asset to you in some way." Mr. Mehta says advising young entrepreneurs "is mostly a two-way street," allowing him to learn about their products and markets. *PHOTOS: SKYLER FIKE; MARINA PIEDADE*

because the woman expressed interest in a passion of hers, building a strong corporate culture. "It was a sweet spot for me," Ms. Packard says.

Years ago, Pete Kadens heard Glen Tullman, a serial entrepreneur, investor and executive, give a speech on how to become an entrepreneur. He was so inspired that he quit his job in investment banking and called Mr. Tullman to ask him to invest in the new business he planned to start. "I thought, 'He's going to be my investor, my mentor, my best friend,'" Mr. Kadens recalls.

Five unreturned calls later, Mr. Tullman's assistant begged the executive to call Mr. Kadens back so he would stop leaving messages, says Mr. Tullman, now CEO of Livongo, a Mountain View, Calif., maker of patient-monitoring systems.

Mr. Tullman called Mr. Kadens but refused to invest in his business. Such trusting relationships "don't happen overnight," he says. He was impressed by Mr. Kadens's persistence, though, and eventually agreed to be an adviser to his company. Four years later, Mr. Kadens got the partnership he wanted, when he and Mr. Tullman co-founded a solar-energy company and in 2013 sold it to Edison International, an energy holding company.

Generosity is a governing value and the reason most experts are willing to help strangers. "Successful people don't want to be taken advantage of, but most do want to pay it forward and help nurture people going into their industry," says



Glen Tullman, right, an entrepreneur and corporate CEO, refused Pete Kadens's request to be his partner in a new business, but he was impressed by Mr. Kadens's persistence and eventually agreed to advise him. The two eventually co-founded a solar-energy firm. *PHOTOS: SOCORE ENERGY; ALLAN NG, LIVONGO HEALTH*

Jill Tipograph, co-founder of Early Stage Careers, a New York City coaching service for recent college grads.

They are usually also looking for people savvy enough to offer to reciprocate in some way.

Steve Blank gets dozens of emails a day from people who want his advice or opinion. “I feel like Dear Abby,” says Mr. Blank, a Pescadero, Calif., co-author of “The Startup Owner’s Manual” and a consulting professor at Stanford University. He says one common pitch—“I’d like to buy you coffee so I can pick your brain”—leaves him cold. He wishes more people would “tell me what I’m going to learn,” whether it’s about an unfamiliar technology, market or industry.

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Another route is to volunteer with a project the executive cares about, such as a networking event, fundraiser, film festival or concert, Ms.

Tipograph says. Mr. Kadens nurtured his relationship with Mr. Tullman by

introducing him to potential employees and supporting a cause he cares about, funding diabetes research.

Mr. Amin has offered to move furniture for valued contacts, and once carried suitcases for a mentor's family members during a move, he says. "I make sure they know that I'm always willing to help out."

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