The Wrong Way to Introduce People Over Email

by David Burkus
When I was young and just starting out in my career, one of the networking principles I followed was the common advice of “introduce two people every week.” So every week, I dutifully fired up my computer and typed out an email introduction to two people I’d thought of that week who would benefit from knowing each other.
A few weeks later, after introducing a friend of mine to a fairly well-known author whom I’d collaborated with, I got an email back from the author. His message was short but it cut to the bone: “Not cool. Please reach out first for permission to share my contact information.” Without checking with him first, I’d given this new person permission to contact him whenever and forever.

When it comes to building your network, introductions play an important role. Your direct contacts are a finite number, but the number of people connected to you through others is almost infinite. Moreover, introducing different people in your network to each other helps transform your network from a list of contacts to a thriving community of people interacting and collaborating with each other.

But if you’re making introductions the most common way — the way I used to — you might need to stop.

For many people, the standard introduction happens over email (a medium full of its own flaws). One person will ask you for an introduction to a contact of yours, and you naturally oblige by composing an email addressed to both parties, including contact information and hopefully the context for making the introduction. The email arrives in the inbox of both people and, most likely, the person requesting you make the introduction quickly follows up with a more direct ask of your contact.

But surprise introductions like this are fraught with dangers. If you’re doing them, you’re running the risk of a couple things going wrong:

- **Time.** Unless you’re absolutely sure of a person’s schedule, your email might arrive in her inbox at a time when she’s out of the office. Or it might get lost in her normal deluge of work emails. In either case, it can be some time before the initial email gets a response, and the sudden start and then long pause of the email exchange can make resuming the conversation awkward.
- **Responsibility.** While making a surprise introduction is certainly helpful to the one asking, you’re also asking the receiving party to bear a lot of responsibility. He now has to process who this new contact is but also think through what he can offer, then (most likely) look at his schedule to find a time to take the phone call, grab coffee, or whatever other action is being asked. It’s simple for you, but difficult for him.
- **No “out.”** While the most empathic surprise intros might include an opportunity for the receiving party to decline, it’s really not a true out. Should the receiver want to decline your opportunity to meet, she either has to do so by speaking to both parties or by replying solely to you (which would likely make the requestor feel even more awkward when you pass along that she passed on the opportunity to meet).

Instead of taking the risk of surprise introductions, it’s better to practice “permission introductions” (also known as double opt-in introductions). Simply put, seek permission from both parties through private, individual messages first. (To those who already practice double opt-in introductions, this might sounds obvious, but everyone seems to practice their own specific brand of email etiquette.
— which is to say, there is no commonly accepted email behavior. Let’s change that, starting with networking.)

When a request for an introduction comes in, explain to the requestors that you’ll reach out to your contact, but also use that conversation as a chance to get additional information, such as the following:

- What’s the context or backstory behind their request?
- What’s the benefit to both parties (if there is one)?
- What action are they going to ask your contact to take?

These are questions that smart requestors will usually state up front anyway, but it’s a good opportunity to make sure you have everything you need when you reach out to your contact.

When you do reach out to contact for permission, make sure you add your own context to that information, such as:

- Is this a trusted friend or a random LinkedIn connection? (If the latter, you probably shouldn’t even pass the request along.)
- Is there an opportunity for mutual benefit that you see but that both parties may not?
- How will you stay involved in the new relationship?

You’ll also want to ask them about their communication preferences and take that opportunity to provide the out.

If you’ve got a match and both parties are enthusiastic, then you’ve made both of their jobs easier and the introduction more valuable. You’ve also expanded everyone’s network. And that’s pretty cool.

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