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RETALES BOTIJERO/GETTY IMAGES

We all have professional idols we'd like to meet. Sometimes we might luck into getting to say hello at a conference or having a mutual friend who can introduce us. But often, despite our suspicions that we have a lot in common with and could even be friends with our heroes, they remain out of reach.

I've been on both sides of the equation. Readers have emailed me about wanting to connect, and I've done my share of approaching people I admire without seeming like a groupie or a stalker. I've found

four strategies to be effective in connecting with high-profile strangers, even without the benefit of a warm introduction.

Establish your credibility. When you send a networking request, it's important to immediately set yourself apart as someone worth knowing. For instance, when I recently wrote to a prominent film director, I started the note by citing our shared alumni affiliation and — because I wanted to inquire about adapting one of his films into a musical — mentioning the prominent shows that had been created by graduates of the [musical theater workshop I'm in](#). He responded, expressed interest in talking further, and noted that a composer friend had told him that “many exciting works have come out of this program.” By establishing your credibility up front, you make it clear that the interaction will be fruitful.

Offer value. To break through your idol's skepticism (since the person likely gets a lot of random requests), you need to demonstrate that you understand how you can help them. That was certainly the case with one message I received the week before I was scheduled to speak in Denmark. “Copenhagen is known for being a city full of great clothing and interior design and decorations,” my correspondent wrote. “I am a fashion designer with a master's degree in marketing and international business, and I have over 14 years' experience working as a stylist.”

She went on to offer to take me on a shopping tour of Copenhagen at no charge, noting that “I have been watching your videos on your website, and I like your clothing style and I am very quick to find clothes you might like.” If I were speaking in the United States, the offer wouldn't have been quite as enticing (“I can show you the best malls in Dallas!”). But she correctly surmised that the opportunity to tour the city with a local and shop for gifts (the holidays were approaching) was compelling. We ended up spending more than half a day together, and we're still in touch. By identifying areas where your skills overlap with the other person's needs, you can go well beyond the typical (and boring) “Let's meet for coffee” message and develop more meaningful connections.

Highlight what makes you interesting. (Even if it's not directly relevant to your idol's work.) Successful people like connecting with other interesting people because it feels like fun, not work. And yet so often they're approached by people taking the role of supplicants, who only want to ask questions and glean wisdom. It's flattering at first, but with enough volume, it can become exhausting. So one secret is to position yourself as a peer who is notable in your own right.

One woman who cold emailed me, and who has since become a friend, closed her note to me with the following: “A bit about me: I talk about [subject matter] on national public radio, and starting this fall will be a co-star on [national TV show]... I recently quit a stupid-stressful desk job that was burning me out big time and am returning to my writing roots. I also play in a New Orleans-style brass band that does free public parades every week and whose guiding principle is to have fun and not worry about wrong notes.”

Her expertise was very different from my own, but she sounded fascinating, so I wrote back immediately. If you can identify unusual aspects of your identity — whether you’ve served as a fighter jet pilot or have visited 100 countries or are an Irish step dancing champion — those colorful details will make you memorable and help ensure that your target will want to connect.

Make it clear that you have no expectations. High-profile people get bombarded with requests. For example, Tim Ferriss’s [email newsletters](#) contain a caveat that he can’t respond personally to messages because he receives 1,000+ per day. Even if your “pitch” is well crafted, your idols might be in a busy period and simply don’t have time to connect. You get extra points, then, for empathizing with this situation and addressing it up front.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” my New Orleans friend wrote me, “and absolutely no expectations because I don’t roll like that. But I was compelled to reach out to you.” Too many strangers reach out with extraordinary levels of entitlement, asking for free coaching, or a significant introduction, or a review and critique of their work. When you, in contrast, show an awareness of your hero’s circumstances, explaining that you don’t want to take up too much time in their schedule, you set yourself apart in a positive way.

One of the joys of the modern era is that, thanks to the internet, people we admire from afar are tantalizingly within reach — just a tweet or an email away. Many people blow that opportunity by failing to establish their credibility (“Who is this person?”) or going directly to an ask without demonstrating any reason their target would want to connect. By using these strategies, you’ll have the opportunity to stand out and build better connections with people you’ll be proud to have in your network.

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