

## RESPECTING BOUNDARIES

BY ANNE SCARLETT

In the sea of networking, sailing haphazardly into uncharted waters is ill-advised.

**THE CONCEPT OF NETWORKING** in business has never been more prevalent—or easier, thanks to technology—than it is today.

But sometimes networking can be taken too far too fast. Where do you draw this line? Consider the three below scenarios. Do any of them sound familiar?

1) You're approached by a business contact (or even a personal friend) of whom you have not yet had firsthand experience with their competencies, performance or work ethic. Even so, this contact requests that you make a recommendation on their behalf, vouching for their abilities and character, to one of your valued, precious contacts.

2) You receive a LinkedIn invitation (without a thoughtfully composed note of introduction or explanation) from someone you've never met personally. You make an educated guess that their intentions are to either a) gain permission to peruse your complete list of contacts or b) increase their overall contact count.

3) Disguised as a "favor," a contact asks for your help—free of charge. Unfortunately, the scope creeps above and beyond some solid business advice and/or mentorship. Instead, this so-called favor quickly evolves into real services that your firm offers as part of your core business. (I've personally received several "favor" requests ranging from preparing teams for new business pitches to coaching individuals for interviews to editing content and providing feedback on marketing strategies.) While your contact will frame the request with comments like "Don't spend much time on this" or "Please only do this when

it's convenient for you," it's obvious that they expect the high quality typical of your firm. And yet, they clearly don't intend to compensate you for your time nor your expertise.

These examples are networking boundary-crossers. Let's review them, point-by-point.

**Recommendations.** When we make a recommendation, we are putting our own reputation on the line. Contacts are valuable, and many are also fragile. Our credibility can rapidly evaporate if we recommend someone we don't

really know. Prior to making an endorsement, it's prudent to be somewhat familiar with the subject's work habits, character and results. Recommending someone without a good sense of their abilities might someday come back to haunt you.

**LinkedIn with strangers.**

Some people say it doesn't make sense to be on LinkedIn if you're

not willing to accept invitations from strangers. They exclaim, "Why be on this site if you won't expand your network as far-flung as possible?" To that, I respond, "How can we make relevant introductions between people that we don't know personally? And how can we trust that these 'stranger-contacts' won't troll amongst my actual contacts, which can be a real intrusion?"

Further, the notion that LinkedIn loses its value when a user limits their "connections" to people that they know is just nonsense. I'd much rather have some working knowledge of my contacts (even if it's minimal or distant) rather than scratching my head with thousands upon thousands of contacts, wondering, "How the heck do I know this person? Can I even remotely trust them to do business with and/or connect them with others?"

There's one exception to this will-accept-no-strangers-on-LinkedIn-rule. If a stranger writes a personal note with a well-crafted explanation as to why we should connect and get to know one another, then I'm personally more apt to accept the invite.

**Requests for free services.** For years, I've said "no" to requests for free services when it reaches the point that I'm being taken advantage of. However, I'd prefer to not be put in that position in the first place. It's uncomfortable and it's unfair.

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Effective networking involves giving abundantly while expecting nothing in return.

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## Networking within Boundaries

Effective networking involves giving abundantly while expecting nothing in return. In that very spirit, I'm sure that you offer many things to your contacts. Speaking for myself, I'm delighted and proactive about:

**Brainstorming with executive recruiters** when they call about relevant, specific positions and inquire about anyone in my network that I might recommend as a good fit. I'm even willing to review the position's details and insert them into networking conversations if I think it will help others.

**Referring or recommending someone whom I believe in.** I will, however, limit my recommendation details to only what I feel comfortable saying and nothing more.

**Making an introduction between contacts on LinkedIn or email.** When I'm asked to do this, I always tee it up

with whatever information I'm able to share about both parties. Even if they are not quite as high-impact as actual "recommendations," introductions are still a wonderful networking gift.

**Inviting people to real-time networking functions** and "working the room" with them if it makes sense.

**Providing mentoring and advice.** While I'm not keen on editing, coaching, consulting, etc., for free (those services are my livelihood, after all), I'm glad to offer some advice—from a high-level perspective, not the nitty-gritty details. I'm also open to brainstorming specific challenges with contacts. Sure, this exchange may ultimately include a bit of informal coaching, but no big deal. I'm glad to do it. To me, that's what networking is all about.

I would love to hear *your* perspective on this topic. What are your boundaries when it comes to networking?

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