Let’s face it: Getting what you want in life requires the salesperson in all of us to come out. One very important aspect of sales is networking. Some of us love it but, really, most of us HATE it! It is hard. Hard to know who you should talk to, hard to know how to act, and hard to know what to say.

As career professionals, we often discuss how to network. What does it look like? Or, just as importantly, what does it NOT look like? Networking is a bit counter-intuitive. Most of us go into a networking situation thinking, “What do I need to get out of this?” and then we say exactly that, what WE need to get out of it. Don’t do it!

Networking is about establishing and maintaining a relationship with someone before you ask for help. The rules don't change just because it is not face-to-face. Let me give you an example of a very common mistake we see in our business.

Last week, I received a LinkedIn request that simply said “Susan, I am looking for a new career opportunity and would like to add you to my professional network on LinkedIn.”

We are always open to meeting people and building our network. Of course, I accepted, although already I was feeling a bit on the defense. Why, what's the big deal? I have never met this person and I feel like a favor is being requested or is about to be requested of me.

So, let's go over a few basic ideas when using LinkedIn or any networking tool.

An ineffective LinkedIn invitation typically has one or more of the following elements:

- The generic request to connect. About 90% of the requests I receive are in this format. Would you connect with someone who walked up on the street and said, “Hi, you don’t know me, but be my friend!”? I don’t think that is likely to happen.

- The “I see you are connected to Ms. X, could you make an introduction?” What would your response be to this if the tables were turned? Likely, it would be something like, “Wait a minute... you’re a complete stranger to me, and you expect me to go out on a limb for you, and do you a favor?”

- The “Mr. X has indicated that you are friends” request but you have never heard of them.

- Misspellings. Introduction? Seriously?

A great LinkedIn invitation typically has one or more of the following:
A Brief Idea Of How You Heard About The Connection

Networking is about building a relationship. Relationships are about give and take, not take and give if you can. Remember, this very important concept. Never ask for something right away. Just keep it simple. And start building that relationship.

A Personalized Message

A great example is, “I've enjoyed getting to know you on Twitter and appreciate your retweets. How about we connect here, too? I'd like to add you to my professional network on LinkedIn.” This invitation got my attention and I am more likely to help this person if requested to do so.

If We Have Met, How We Met

If you are at a large gathering, your intended connection might not remember every person he or she met. It’s always a good idea to say, “I enjoyed meeting you at the breakfast this morning.”

Attention to Detail

Make sure your spelling and grammar are correct.

So, let’s get back to my story. Immediately after accepting the request to join, my thoughts were validated. I received an e-mail with the following message:

"I would like to thank you for accepting my invitation on LinkedIn. I would like to ask for your assistance in my search for a new career opportunity. My last position ended after the business closed; I was with the organization for over eight years."

A long description of her attributes followed ending with, “Any assistance with my search is greatly appreciated.”

Now, let me tell you why this approach doesn’t work (and we get this type of e-mail often). Would you march into a doctor’s office or an attorney’s office and ask for free services? I hope not; you wouldn’t get very far. It would be incredibly presumptuous and it puts those who can help you in a defensive mode.

My company helps people in their job search. It’s a gratifying business when you are able to help someone move on in his or her career. When we have a relationship with someone and value them as part of our network, we often pass their names on to recruiters, review their resumes, and so on. But notice, we have to have a relationship. While I will respond, I will likely not meet with this person.

So, let’s look at an e-mail that did work. I met a potential employee at a conference. This is the e-mail I received following the event:
"My fellow presenter and I met you at the CHRA conference. You mentioned that you occasionally look for executive level coaches. After visiting your website I have a greater level of interest and would like to know more about your work and opportunities where my talents might be useful to Innovative Career Consulting. Would you like to get together? How does a time over the new few weeks look to you?"

For me, this e-mail was great.

It tells me how I know him, what he can do for me and compliments me on being a company he would like to find out more about. Clearly, he is interested in working with our firm but his approach was to comment on the idea that he might be able to help us. It was not how we would help him. It was short, sweet, and effective. I set up a meeting that day.

Networking is not rocket science, although it can feel that way. First and foremost, it’s about establishing a give and take relationship. It is also very important to be yourself and have fun meeting people. This is what will set you apart.

As you go forth in your LinkedIn networking efforts, please remember it is as much about how you can help as it is about how you can be helped.

Susan Ruhl, founder of OI Partners-Denver, has developed a sharp eye for how job seekers can adjust their approach for a strategically focused career.