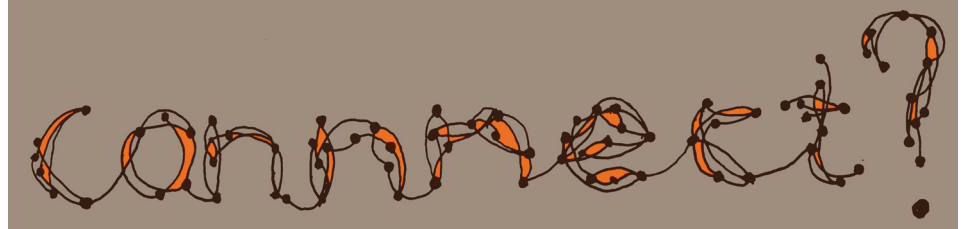


Linked In: Four Rules to Follow

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Nine million members of the working world coexist online in the professional LinkedIn network. Leverage the power of this important social network to build connections and do business, but keep your reputation in mind.

Make connections with caution

It's incredibly tempting to adopt a devil-may-care attitude when connecting with professionals over LinkedIn. After all, it only takes a click of a button to invite someone to be part of your network. However, if you connect with people you don't know well, or at all, you'll invite awkward moments when they impress upon you to make introductions with others in your network.

Rule of Thumb: Don't connect with someone that you don't really know. Maybe it's the intern at your previous job, or maybe it's that guy who works in Sales on the 4th floor. (What's his name again?) If you aren't willing to stake your reputation on theirs, think twice before making the connection.

Do unto others

As with other social networks, engagement is key. If you want people to engage with you through LinkedIn, you'll need to put in the effort, too. There are several great ways to interact with people through LinkedIn.

- Use LinkedIn Answers to ask a question of the community; better yet, answer questions from others.
- Write a recommendation about one of your connections (but not unless you mean it!).
- Ask people to introduce you to others, and be understanding if they decline to make the introduction.

Rule of Thumb: You must give to receive. LinkedIn provides a variety of outlets to connect with others; use them to grow and strengthen your network without abusing the system.

Set the stage

When inviting someone to connect with you, remind that person how the two of you met. While LinkedIn provides a convenient "form" invitation, add a little something extra to help them understand why you want their connection. Start by writing "It was nice meeting you last month at..." Be brief, but be honest about your intentions.

Rule of Thumb: Personalize your invitation with a few details to jog their memory. Don't write your career history, but offer people a few sentences about where and when you had the pleasure of making their acquaintance.

Handle awkward moments with aplomb

The small-but-mighty "introductions" feature lets you make introductions that can be both serendipitous and slightly awkward. As more people seek to benefit from LinkedIn, requests for introductions will become more commonplace. Sometimes, you may not want to make the introduction. Simply tell the requester that you feel uncomfortable doing so at this time.

You'll also receive invitations from people you don't know. Scott Allen on Linked Intelligence recommends handling these situations with a note, perhaps beginning, "Thanks for inviting me to connect on LinkedIn. I would love to start a dialogue, get to know each other and find out how we might be of service to each other..."

Rule of Thumb: Be honest with people when you feel uncomfortable with their requests. A snub can hurt just as badly on the Internet as in real life, so most people will appreciate your honesty.