Networking: The Abridged Game Manual

Guidelines for cold messaging people

I just received a random email from a stranger in which they ask me 5-10 hard-to-answer questions on effective altruism, emotional health, and moral cluelessness that bother them.

Reflecting on this, I came up with a list of eight rules of thumb you might want to consider when you cold message someone. You might not want to address all of them in every message (because that contradicts no. 8), but they may be a good pointer towards what would make people keener to respond:

1. Add a one-sentence introduction so they know how to interact with you.

2. Make clear how you got hold of their email address.

3. Make clear why they may want to talk to you.

4. Make clear why you think they are the right person to solve your problem.

5. Courteously emphasize that you don't mind if they are too busy to respond.

6. Start or end with a note of praise or gratitude.

7. ~~Ask for their permission *before* you dump a long list of questions or any other kind of work on them.~~ To minimize friction and time investment for them, add your list of questions to the first email right away. However, make clear that it is okay and encouraged for them to say *no*. For example, lead with a sentence like "Here are some questions I'm trying to answer for myself. Of course, no worries if you are too busy to help me with that."

8. Keep the message as short and clear as possible.

Let me know if there's anything you find valuable that I overlooked.