6 Ways to Get Me to Email You Back

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Two years ago, I made a commitment to do something that made me profoundly uncomfortable. I had just finished writing my first book, and I promised my publisher that I would reach out to bestselling authors and senior leaders, asking them to read my book and consider endorsing it.

I knew their quotes would go a long way toward attracting readers. But as someone who generally prefers to be on the giving side of exchanges, rather than the asking and receiving end, I knew it was time to pick up some new tips. I began seeking advice, scouring the research evidence, and test-driving what I learned in my quest to capture the attention of busy people.

Three months ago, I became one of those people when the *New York Times* ran a cover story on my work, "**Is giving the secret to getting ahead?**" In that piece, Susan Dominus wrote that I was "more reliable than Google and almost as fast," and that I "virtually never" say no. Suddenly, my inbox was flooded with messages from thousands of strangers asking for help. [The most entertaining one came from a woman who wrote, "I just wanted to test you, to find out if it's true."] I noticed that I responded much more quickly to some emails than others —and the ones that elicited fast replies followed the same principles that I studied. Here's what worked for them, and for me.

1. Perfect the subject line. When it comes to information, it's hard not to judge a book by its cover. In ***To Sell Is Human***, Dan Pink covers a **study showing** that people are more likely to read emails with subject lines that create curiosity or provide utility. When people aren't busy, they're drawn in by subject lines that intrigue them. But when they're busy, curiosity fades in importance; the emails that get read are the ones with practical subject lines. When you want to grab the attention of someone

important, scrap the entertaining subject lines and focus on utility. Here are some of the most effective subject lines that landed in my inbox from strangers:

- Curiosity: "Advice for a fellow teleological people-person," "I do not want anything from you," "Your book kept me up all night," "I will fly up and see you; you interest me," and "Dan Pink would want me to write a creative subject line here"
- Utility: "Applying your techniques to recovering addicts" and "Getting you to Atlanta"
- Both: "Can you help give away 4 million dollars a year?" [Here, the sender cleverly went on to clarify, "I know the subject sounds like something you'd get from Nigeria, but..."]

2. Tell them why you chose them. On the receiving end, I was surprised by the number of readers who wrote asking for help without explaining why I was the right person to help them. One person reached out looking for advice on how to become a millionaire; another asked for help fighting a malpractice lawsuit. Neither of these requests is easily handled by a management professor. We know from **research on social loafing** that when people feel they have no unique contribution to make, they feel little responsibility to step up. Good emails overcome this barrier by highlighting what drew you to this person and the distinctive value that he or she can add. It's worth devoting a sentence or two to what you know about the person's work, and how it has influenced your life. Some of the best emails I received referenced particular studies that I had conducted and speeches I had given.

3. Show that you've done your homework. A sizeable number of readers wrote asking for links to articles that were freely available on my public website. As author Tim Ferriss, himself a cold-email virtuoso, **writes**, "It's amazing how many would-be mentees or beneficiaries ask busier people for answers Google could provide in 20 seconds." The psychologist Bernard Weiner **has found** that people are more motivated to help those who try to help themselves. When you reach out to someone busy, Ferriss advises, "Explicitly state what you've done to get answers or help yourself."

4. Highlight uncommon commonalities. I felt a stronger connection to strangers who emphasized something unusual that we had in common. As the psychologist Robert Cialdini sums up the evidence from ***Influence***, "Similarity literally draws people together." In ***Give and Take***, I elaborate on this principle to point out that similarities matter most when they're rare. We bond when we share uncommon commonalities, which allow us to feel that we fit in and stand out at the same time. Think of the last time you traveled abroad and met someone from your hometown. If you met at home, the connection wouldn't stand out as unique, but on foreign soil, you're the only two people from there, so you feel a sense of closeness. When I cold-emailed Zappos.com CEO Tony Hsieh, my first instinct was to mention that we attended the same college. After realizing that thousands of people share that connection with him, I looked for uncommon commonalities. I ended up writing that I first learned about him when my college roommate followed in his footsteps to run the Quincy Grille. And even though I'm aware of this principle, I'm apparently not immune to it. When I received emails from a fellow springboard diver and a former magician—two relatively uncommon hobbies of mine—I couldn't escape the feeling of affinity.

5. Make your request specific, and keep it short and sweet. A large number of emails were mini-novels, spanning multiple single-spaced pages. The longer the message, the longer it took me to read and respond, and the more overloaded my inbox, the less patient I was in

reading them. As the psychologist Robert Sutton recaps the evidence in ***Good Boss, Bad Boss***, people are more helpful when they're given clear directions on how to contribute. When Tim Ferriss **challenged Princeton students** to reach out to celebrities and top executives, one got an answer from then-Google CEO Eric Schmidt simply by asking him about when in his life he was happiest. Schmidt responded: "Tomorrow." **Ferriss suggests** that the best approach is to "send a two- to three-paragraph e-mail which explains that you are familiar with their work, and ask one simple-to-answer but thought-provoking question in that e-mail related to their work or life philosophies. The goal is to start a dialogue so they take the time to answer future e-mails—not to ask for help. That can only come after at least three or four genuine e-mail exchanges."

6. Express gratitude. My least favorite emails made demands instead of expressing appreciation. One person wrote, "We should definitely meet," and another implored, "Please answer this question." In my research, **I've found** that people provide more extensive and useful help when it's an enjoyable choice than when it's driven by perceived pressure or obligation.

I was excited to help when I felt I could make a difference, not when someone was attempting to coerce me or create a sense of obligation. One of the least motivating strings of emails came from a reader who described a complicated family situation and demanded that I respond "promptly." Within a week, I sent a three-paragraph reply. I explained that it would be difficult to help without knowing the people involved, but offered a suggestion, attached an article, and recommended a book. The reply from the person said, "I am in receipt of your email" without a single expression of gratitude, and extinguished my desire to be helpful.

Gratitude is more powerful than we realize. In **one experiment**, Francesca Gino and I asked people to spend some time helping a student improve a job application cover letter. After they sent their feedback, the student replied with a message, "I just wanted to let you know that I received your feedback on my cover letter," and asked for help with another one in the next three days. Only 32% of the people helped. When the student added just eight words—"Thank you so much! I am really grateful"—the rate of helping doubled to 66%. In **another experiment**, after people helped one student, a different student asked them for help. Being thanked by the first student boosted helping rates from 25% to 55%. The punch line: a little thanks goes a long way, not only for encouraging busy people to help you, but also for motivating them to help others like you.

For more on achieving influence and motivating people to help, see Adam's new book ***Give and Take***, a *New York Times* bestseller.

Image credit: hubpages.com

Sandra Pruitt • 3rd+ 2y
Servant Leadership, Ferocious Book lover, Bona fide Charcuterie...

What I great article! I've been following you for the last few months. It's been interesting 😄 I've learned about ass hats and now my new favorite is "Fit in and stand out at the same time" I've just ordered your book Give and Take. Can't wait to read it. ...more

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Sharon Soons • 3rd+ 3y
Expert generalist | Proud Do-Gooder | Open Space and Parks Promoter

Another great post, and relevant til the end of time (tho i hope we find something better than e-mail by then!) I continue to be amazed when people do not think or know to say thanks. I love writing (snail mail!) thank you notes... people often thank me for sending them, and it's lead to many fruitful relationships. ...more

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Colleen Martin • 3rd+ 3y
Senior Communications Professional

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improve their responses by following some of this guidance. It's not rocket science. it's emotional i...ence. ...more

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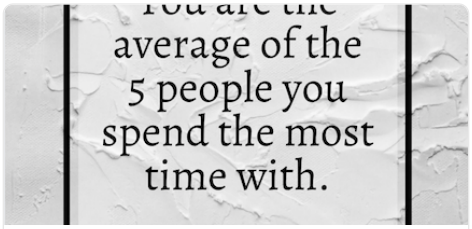

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