Respecting boundaries in networking
When does the line get crossed?
By Anne Scarlett, Printed in RainToday and AE Marketing Journal

Sometimes the line between effective networking and 'gone-too-far' gets crossed. Where do you draw this line? Consider these three scenarios below. Do any of them sound familiar?

Scenario I: 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.

Scenario II: 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 either 1. to gain permission to peruse your complete list of contacts, or 2. to increase their overall contact count.

Scenario III: 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. {To share personal examples, I've received 'favor' requests to prepare teams for new business pitches; to coach individuals for interviews; to edit content; to provide feedback on marketing strategies; etc.} 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 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 far prefer to have some working knowledge of my contacts (even if it's minimal or distant) rather then 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 to connect 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.

EFFECTIVE NETWORKING WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES

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

1. **Brainstorming with executive recruiters** when they call about relevant, specific positions, inquiring about anyone in my network that I might recommend as a good fit. I'm even willing to review the position details and insert it into networking conversations if I think it will help others.
2. **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.
3. **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.
4. **Inviting people to real-time networking functions** and 'working the room' with them if it makes sense.
5. **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. Again, I'm glad to do it. To me, that's what networking is all about.

Fellow service providers and service buyers, I would love to hear your perspective on this topic. What are your boundaries when it comes to networking?