

The Right Way to Ask, ‘Can I Pick Your Brain?’

Know what you want. Be kind. Stick the landing.

By [Anna Goldfarb](#) March 17, 2019

It’s a request that experienced people of any industry have gotten at some point: “Can I buy you coffee and pick your brain?” While well-intentioned, execution is everything, and sometimes these unsolicited requests for a casual, informational interviews can come off as entitled and presumptuous. And for the receiver, it can be difficult or even unrealistic for a busy professional to coordinate bespoke consultation appointments for everyone who asks.

“Any request that requires someone to block off time on their calendar — for a call, for a coffee, to stop to chat with your team — can be, for someone who is running a packed professional schedule, a massive ask,” said Cal Newport, a computer science professor at Georgetown University and author of “[Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World.](#)”

If you’re thinking of asking a superstar in your field out for coffee so you can learn what makes them tick — and how you can apply that knowledge to your own career path — here’s how to do it right.

Know your intentions

[Dorie Clark](#), adjunct professor at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business and the author of “[Entrepreneurial You](#),” said asking to pick someone’s brain has become overused to the point of thoughtlessness. Done wrong it almost certainly

sends the wrong message, she said, and these requests can seem as if you're following a generic script.

She suggests changing the language from, "Can I pick your brain?" to the more friendly, "I would like your advice." People respond more positively to that phrasing because it conveys intention; that you're approaching a certain person for very particular reasons.

"It's not about checking a box. It's about meeting someone and connecting to really build a relationship," Ms. Clark said.

As you craft your message, immediately highlight any commonalities and unique bonds you have. Mentioning you both attended the same college is good. Mentioning you both interned at the same radio station is better.

Next, articulate why this person is distinctly qualified to give you the knowledge you seek. Make a clear, compelling case for why you're initiating contact. Be vulnerable, and get to the heart of why you're reaching out.

Mind your manners

[Adam Grant](#) wants to help the people who contact him. However, the organizational psychologist, Wharton professor and author of "[Give and Take](#)" receives dozens of brain-picking requests every week. It's just not feasible to speed mentor everyone who drops him a line. (By the way, Dr. Grant has gone on the record saying these [networking requests are dubious at best](#).)

Don't make any appeals about how the meeting will benefit the professional you're reaching out to, said Dr. Grant, who contributes to [The Times](#). He also [bristles](#) when people are demanding in any way: "Instead of expressing some sense of entitlement to my time face-to-face, say, 'Hey, would you be open to either a phone call or an email dialogue?' Give me the option to choose how I want to communicate."

Don't be afraid to think outside the box. Dr. Grant recalled how a group of students

all wanted to ask for his advice. They came together as a group and invited him to a short Q. and A. session over Google Hangouts. Instead of fielding 20 or more individual emails, Dr. Grant carved out time to address all the students' questions at once.

“That to me, is the best example of how to use somebody's time well,” he said.

Adjust your expectations

People who receive a high volume of these types of networking requests usually have a screening process in place. Expect light homework, deferrals, referrals or delays in response to a cold email asking to pick their brain.

For Ms. Clark, homework assignments are useful for evaluating a seeker's fortitude. If a person is willing to jump through a few hoops, she reasons, they are more likely to be the kind of person who could benefit from a conversation with her.

Sometimes the homework she gives is as simple as clarifying what the seeker is actually looking for.

“Oftentimes you'll hear, ‘Hi, can I pick your brain? And can we talk about careers for 30 minutes?’” Ms. Clark said. “It's often helpful to just ask, ‘O.K., by careers, what do you mean exactly?’ That forces them to focus their questions.”

Other times, she'll pass along relevant articles and invite the person to chat if they have any follow-up questions. This helps ensure that the following conversation isn't superficial.

As far as referrals go, Dr. Grant appreciates when people give him an out by saying something like, “If you're too busy, is there somebody else you could recommend?” He can still be helpful even if he doesn't have the time to meet up or take a call.

Ace the meeting

Jolie Kerr, advice columnist and host of the [Ask a Clean Person](#) podcast, suggests

you treat the meetup as if it were a job interview. Showing up with a prepared list of targeted, thoughtful questions is “a really good way to not waste someone’s time and make sure you get everything that you need,” she said.

Ms. Clark suggests brushing up on a person’s output before you meet.

“If they have given speeches that are online, they have written books, you should, as a gesture of respect to that person, have familiarized yourself with that content prior to speaking with them,” she said.

It’s also crucial to be aware of how long the meeting runs. Thirty to 60 minutes should be appropriate, give or take. Wear a watch if possible so you don’t have to check your phone for the time. Ms. Clark suggests alerting the expert if the meeting is in danger of running over the agreed upon time limit as a courtesy.

As far as what to talk about once you’re in the same room, Mr. Newport recommends asking questions that invite deeper insight into a person’s background.

“If you want to learn from someone who has accomplished something that you want to replicate, don’t ask for their advice, ask instead for their story,” he said. “Try to isolate what it was they did that made the difference.”

Experts agree you should offer to pay for drinks or a meal. Take notes if appropriate, put your phone down (or stash it out of sight) and focus on the discussion at hand.

Stick the landing

At the conclusion of the meeting, thank the person for taking the time to get together.

“Sending them an email the next day just saying, ‘I really appreciate your time’ goes a really long way,” Ms. Kerr said. “I’m shocked at how often people don’t say ‘thank you’ for things like that.”

If the expert asks you to keep them updated with your progress, do it! Continue the dialogue. If he or she suggests a book, podcast or movie, update them on how the content helped you expand your understanding of a given subject. Take any relevant advice offered and let the expert know how implementing the advice panned out.

Being humble, appreciative and accommodating will make it more likely that the expert will keep making time to meet with others in your position. And when you reach heights in your career and find yourself in the position of being an authority, you'll be better prepared to assist the next generation.

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