

## How to write an introductory letter

If you don't have a friend/contact who can set up a personal meeting, and you haven't been able to gain entry through my more unconventional approaches, at least you should now have the name, title and address of a high-level contact at your potential partner. The next best approach is to send a short letter to this contact. Yes, a personal, on real paper stationery with a stamp, letter. When was the last time you got a personal, stamped and signed letter? Didn't it get your attention? Rarely do people send letters anymore because e-mail is so easy. But e-mail is impersonal; especially to someone you don't know. If you want to grab their attention and show that you have an important proposition that will bring value to their organization...send this personal letter. To make a good first impression, this introductory letter must be short, no longer than 10-12 sentences, and short sentences at that.

Talk about a first impression: I was developing a marketing and partnership program for the USS Potomac Association, which owned Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidential yacht. We had terrific stationery featuring the official Presidential Seal. You can imagine the impact this envelope and stationery had when it hit the desk of the recipient, with its red, white, blue and gold embossed presidential insignia! Now your stationery might not be quite that impressive, but it will be far more impressive than an e-mail.

Here are my recommendations for a successful introduction letter.

- 1) The opening line must grab their attention by talking to the *value that you can bring them*. This will keep them reading. If you are being referred by someone, absolutely use that reference as your first sentence. Be sure to say *why* he/she feels you and this person should get together. You want to emphasize the benefits right up front. Your opening should be something like: "Last year a partnership we developed a partnership with Rebuilding Together and generated a 20% increase in donations. I would like to explore..." And once you have grabbed their attention, next you move into why you feel the alignment between your organizations makes good sense.
- 2) In your research you have chosen these potential partners organizations because they seem to have a good alignment with your organization. You know their key messages, what their CEO or Executive Director has been saying in the media or in their press releases about their organization's role in their community. So in your message you want to show a strong alignment between your organization and what they are saying with their public messaging. Ideally, you want to parrot back to them what they are saying, without repeating the exact words. This is a technique I have used very often. You will sound very much in line with their philosophy because you are saying what they have already said.
- 3) Tell them why you want to help, the problem you're trying to address, like the need for the community to have a new homeless shelter. Briefly explain why your organization might be uniquely positioned to help make this new homeless shelter come into existence.
- 4) Tell them a little bit about your organization, and if possible, something that has been very successful that would relate to what is important to them. This should only be two or

three sentences max.

- 5) If you are a nonprofit approaching a for-profit, you might want to emphasize that a relationship with your organization would be most attractive to your local media, would create strong community awareness of their involvement, serve as a fun project and morale boost for their employees, or other such benefits.
  
- 6) I can't tell you how many times I have seen letters, e-mails or other pitches that have no call-to-action at the end. This is a huge mistake. It's like a car salesman telling you all the benefits of the new car model and then never asking you to buy the car. You must close the deal, even if the deal is just to get that first appointment. So at the end of your message or letter, ask for a specific appointment time, and suggest a few specific appointment times that work for your schedule. For example: "Would you be open on June 17, any time between 9-11:30 a.m., or on the 18th during the same time frame?" Offering this time frame will help reduce the all-too-often back and forth scheduling challenge. And it might make them immediately look at their calendar, which is exactly what you want them to do.

**Note:** This first letter is not and should not be a proposal. It is way too early to get into detail so do not overwhelm them with your ideas. You have one goal: to get a personal face-to-face meeting. You do not want to give them any reason to say, "I saw your proposal and I'm not interested." And this reaction will happen many times if you put too much information and ideas into your introductory letter. In many ways, this letter is a tease and the more concisely written, focusing on a couple of key points as to why you feel this partnership is well aligned and brings benefit to their organization, the more successful the chance of you arousing their interest and getting that all-important face-to-face meeting.