

How to Network Your Way to Success on LinkedIn (Without Adding Strangers)

Most of the other answers [in the Quora thread] are advocating that you connect directly (i.e., add them on LinkedIn) with people you don't actually know in real life. Maybe I'm an old fogey or a sourpuss or some other four-letter word, but in my mind:

- It's really annoying when strangers add me on LinkedIn.
- It gives a negative impression of the person, unless they have a really targeted and thoughtful message attached (many people don't).
- It's not what the platform was designed for in the first place.

LinkedIn even tells you this pretty explicitly, and the company has several ways to punish you if you do this too much.

So, instead of advising you to spam strangers, here's how I would use LinkedIn if I were a college student trying to get a job or internship:

1. Make your profile awesome (duh)
2. Request to connect as many people from your imported contacts list or the "People you may know" feature as possible, PROVIDED THAT: A) You have actually met them in real life, B) The person likely remembers who you are and doesn't think you totally suck, and C) You know enough about the person to give a short description of them if somebody asked you (and you suspect they could do the same). These criteria are important because if you don't fulfill them, you really don't know this person and you will probably be bothering them if you ask to connect, which is both annoying for them and reputationally bad for you.
3. Once you start doing the above, it will still take you a while to build up a network of decent enough reach for LinkedIn to be useful to you. Commit to adding connections (this would be your classmates, professors, friends, colleagues from your part-time job, relatives, etc.) on the platform once a

week or so for two or three months, until you build up to a few hundred connections.

4. After your LinkedIn network is big enough to start resembling your real-life network, you can start using it to target business professionals in companies and industries that you'd like to explore (i.e., people you haven't met yet). Follow the advice that the other answerers have given about how to identify connection targets, but don't connect with them directly. Instead, use the handy "How you're connected" tool (see below) to identify the intermediaries between you and the person you're interested in meeting.

5. Reach out to the intermediaries and ask them if they'd be willing to introduce you to the target you've identified. (Ideally over email rather than LinkedIn message, because this takes the discussion off-platform to a place the recipient and target are much more likely to be checking frequently). Make sure to provide a pretense for the discussion, such as, "I'm really excited about their company and think I could possibly be a good fit as an employee/intern, would you mind making a brief introduction to this person for me? As a token of my everlasting thanks, I will totally buy you a salami sandwich when I see you again next Tuesday." This is where having intermediaries or connections you actually know and who are willing to vouch for you is so valuable. If you've added people indiscriminately, your network is far less potent.

6. Repeat.

The value of taking this approach is that the people you'd like to meet have a much higher chance of responding and being interested in helping you out if they meet you via a warm, direct introduction. And the network you develop--and the opportunities you get as a result--will be a lot more organic and "real," because the people you meet actually know people who know you. And those people will say nice things about you and send opportunities in your direction because they value your actual contributions, not your ability to be a savvy networker. Good luck!

Some further points on networking and reputation: a lot of people misunderstand how networking works. You do not want to get the reputation for being a “networker.” This reputation implies that you are more concerned with hacking your way into a big network than actually being somebody worth networking with, i.e., an opportunist instead of a true contributor. The person who sends a lot of unsolicited LinkedIn requests to strangers is the same type of person who follows 50,000 “team followback” people on Twitter just to build a big following themselves. People who do this are largely despised by their co-workers and acquaintances in real life. This is my main takeaway advice for college students looking to build networks: The No. 1 thing you can do to have a great network is become the kind of person that people want to be connected with, and let the network largely take care of itself. Imagine you're a musician who has a big following on SoundCloud and Twitter. Do you want to be known as the person with the huge following because you're so great at social media? Or do you want to be known as the person with a huge following because you're an incredible guitarist? Thought so.

That said, none of this means that you should never reach out to strangers or go to networking events or any of that stuff. It just means that these activities should support your career goals, rather than become your primary focus.