

CONTACT SPORTS

How to make things with
new people go right

Stephen Diedrich

Contact Sports

How to Make Things With New People Go Right

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Table of Contents

What's This All About?	4
What You'll Learn	8
Setting Your Expectations	10
Be Personal	12
Be Positive	14
Be Professional	17
Connect the Dots	19
Be Concise	21
Clearly State Your Goal	23
Share the Benefit to Them	25
Have a Clear Next Step	27
Remove Obligation	31
Be Easy to Work With	33
Final Thoughts	36

What's This All About?

I was 22, fresh off the plane in San Francisco, knowing exactly zero people in the entire city. I was staying in a temporary apartment, had no contacts, no college friends, no family—nothing. It was just me and the music.

That morning, scrolling through a company message board, I spotted a post:

"Anybody here and want to hang out and go to this party?"
I knew nobody. I was here. I was playing with house money.
I replied: "Yes."

A few hours later, I arrived at a restaurant in the Mission District and met this total stranger.

"Hey! You must be Steph!"

He greeted me on the curbside as I exited the car, extending his hand with such genuine warmth you'd think we were long-lost friends.

I was taken aback. The enthusiasm, the immediate personal connection—there was a level of social warmth I'd never experienced from a complete stranger.

Where I came from, new people were met with cautious nods and measured distance until they'd proven themselves. But here was this guy, treating our first meeting like the continuation of a friendship rather than its awkward beginning. The guarded nature I usually carried into new social situations melted away almost instantly.

That afternoon became my first lesson in what has been put together in the pages of this book — the art and science of connecting with strangers in ways that open doors, build relationships, and create aligned opportunities. I left wondering: How could I ensure I was making people feel as welcomed and comfortable as I did that day?

I've always been interested in psychology and social dynamics—partly out of necessity and partly because of the sheer volume of hot girls in my freshman year sociology class (LOL).

As an adopted kid, I grew up constantly negotiating how I related to myself and the world around me. When you don't share DNA with your family, you become hyper-aware of the components of human connections. You learn early that relationships aren't just biological inevitabilities or proximity-based accidents; they're built through intention, decision, and deliberate action.

Over the years, I noticed how certain individuals could walk into rooms full of strangers and leave with collaborators, supporters, and friends. I was always intrigued—was it personality or

patterns? The answer is both, but there are far more patterns than most people realize. Once you become aware of these patterns, you can integrate them into your approach without sacrificing authenticity.

Fast forward 12 years: I had friends and connections across the world and felt confident walking into any situation—solo, with someone, or in a group—and feeling completely at ease.

While this book focuses primarily on the social-professional context—landing clients, building creative collaborations, and securing partnerships (like I did at Google and YouTube Fashion) — most of these principles can apply to social situations as well. The fundamentals of human connection don't change — it's still people.

The truth is, connecting with strangers isn't magic or some innate talent that only extroverts possess. I'm actually very introverted, but I've learned to be very confident in social situations.

In the following pages I unpack the ten principles that I've noticed make things go right. I'll share everything I've learned about turning strangers into collaborators—not through manipulation or "networking tricks," but through authentic, respectful engagement that creates real value for everyone involved.

Whether you're trying to land your dream job, find creative collaborators, secure clients, or simply expand into new territory, the principles in this book will give you the psychological insights and practical tools to make it happen. They've worked for me, for my clients, and for countless others who've put them into practice —and they will for you too.

- *What's This All About?* -

What You'll Learn

I wrote the initial version of this manual in 2024 as a one-pager to help my artist and creative clients advance their commercial agenda in a way that felt authentic.

If you recognize yourself in any of these situations, this playbook is for you:

- You have brilliant ideas for collaborations but freeze up when reaching out to people or brands you admire
- You avoid cold outreach because terms like "networking" and "sales" make you cringe
- You struggle to get traction with brands or clients you'd love to work with

And trust me—I've made every mistake in this book, multiple times. I've sent horrible emails, lost potentially amazing connections, and otherwise created unnecessary friction. The reason why I know these are the principles that make things go right is because I've gotten it wrong enough times to be certain.

The 10 principles you're about to learn unpack the psychology behind meaningful contact—the unspoken human dynamics that determine whether someone will engage with you or put their guard up. They reveal why small adjustments in your approach can dramatically change how others respond to you.

These principles will help you understand what's happening beneath the surface during those critical moments of first contact—the unspoken rules and hidden signals that nobody ever explicitly tells you about but everyone responds to. When someone ghosts you after a seemingly great conversation, there's usually a principle at play that they'll never reveal was the reason.

The difference between an ignored email and the beginning of an amazing collaboration often comes down to psychological principles that nobody teaches us—until now.

So let's begin with the first principle that makes all the difference...

Setting Your Expectations

What do we mean by cold outreach?

You're reaching out to someone who doesn't know you and isn't expecting to hear from you. It's both an art (approach) and a science (volume and follow up). The magic is in the science, but the art helps make things stick.

The Art:

There is some technique to securing attention and turning that spark into an amazing idea. It's part people skills, sales skills, and communication skills. The next pages of this guide are to share some of these tips and context relevant to you.

The Science:

It's a volume and follow up game. This is where the magic happens. Much of success with cold outreach is a numbers game. I want to be clear: you WILL be rejected. Nothing in the following pages will prevent that. It's part of the process. Reach out anyway and make it happen.

The Mindset:

- Be confident in who you are as a person.
- Don't say no for someone – reach out anyway.
- Reach out anyway!!!

Let's start with a thought exercise:

- Think about the last time you received cold outreach that actually got your attention. What made it stand out? Why did that work?
- Now think about the outreach you ignored, or meetings that were off-putting. Why was that? What would you have done differently?

As you review the following pages and principles keep those experiences in mind.

You've already been on both sides of this equation – use that insight to create the kind of outreach that was well received by you and inspired action.

Now let's get into it..

Be Personal

Main Point:

Build genuine connections by identifying a person and getting their name right.

Why It Matters:

People are more interested in their own name than all other names combined. By getting somebody's name right, you are showing interest in them, which will encourage them to show interest in you.

What to Know:

The person you're reaching out to has a name. It's critical to find it out and address them by it. In writing, make sure it's spelled correctly. In speaking, make sure it's pronounced correctly.

Never assume nicknames until you're certain that's their preference.

I want to make a special note about reaching out to companies. It's often helpful to confirm you're speaking to the right person. Larger companies will make decisions by committee, but you should still identify one person to address directly.

Using the person's name—and getting it right—shows that you care about the human and not just about advancing your broader agenda.

What this looks like in practice:

1. Research the correct spelling and pronunciation. How?
 - Check their social media profiles.
 - Watch video interviews with them.
 - Consult with others familiar with their culture/background for a better guess.
2. If necessary, verify pronunciation immediately.
 - "Did I get that right? I want to make sure I got that right."
 - Show genuine interest in correct pronunciation.
3. In writing, identify the person you're addressing.
 - Always find a specific person to address—there is always a person.

Mistakes to Avoid:

- Not using their name and hoping they won't notice (they will).
- Guessing at pronunciations and rolling with it without verifying.
- Waiting too long to correct a mistake.

"A person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language."

- Dale Carnegie

- *Be Personal* -

Be Positive

Main Point:

Show up with positive energy and make someone's day brighter through your interaction.

Why It Matters:

People naturally gravitate toward positive energy. Imagine what's possible when a positive person proposes an inspiring idea that makes sense for everyone...

What to Know:

We tend to see others as we see ourselves, so your outlook on yourself and your energy sets the tone for any interaction you have.

Whether in writing or in person, your positivity (or lack thereof) will shine through. In meetings, it's crucial to read the room, but the trick is not necessarily to match low energy—instead, help lift it by inviting others to meet yours.

If you're not taking care of your health—like staying active and eating well—it can be more challenging to maintain a positive outlook toward others.

In Practice:

- Do all those things we know we should be doing.
 - Exercise, eat healthy, get sleep, drink water, stretch.
 - Learn, read, connect with the community, and get out of your comfort zone.
 - Take care of your spirit with the practice that works for you.

- 2. In person, take responsibility for the energy of the meeting
 - The trick to doing this is to be one level higher than the room (not 2 or 10), then allow them to meet your energy, and then escalate another level.

- 3. In writing, use a positive framing.
 - Focus on what IS possible.
 - Frame opportunities and ideas in a positive light.
 - Pro-Tip: Smile when writing your message—your mood will follow your body.

For Example:

You're a freelance art director and graphic designer. You spot a potential client and see an opportunity to enhance their branding. You'd love to collaborate and help elevate their brand.

Here's What Not to Say:

"Hey, I see some opportunities to improve your branding!" ←
This is negative, implies criticism, and will likely put them on the defensive.

- Be Positive -

Here's What Might Work Better:

“I’m a longtime customer and fan of your brand. I have an idea for how you could connect with even more people who are highly engaged and use products that complement yours. Would you mind if I shared it with you?”

This approach uses positive framing, highlights a benefit to them, piques curiosity, and offers help.

Mistakes to Avoid:

- Highlighting problems or criticizing their work—even if true, avoid it.
- Engaging with or indulging existing negative energy or hostility.
- Speaking negatively about competitors, whether yours or theirs.

“They say your attitude
determines your latitude”

- Ye

- Be Positive -

Be Professional

Main Point:

Be on time, presentable, and maintain respectful boundaries.

Why It Matters:

People won't continue to work with you or introduce you to others if they aren't confident it will be a pleasant and respectful experience. They'll just disappear and never tell you this.

What to Know:

1. Be on time.

This is binary. You were either on time or you weren't. No exceptions, no excuses. This not only shows respect but also how reliable you are. If you're even 2 seconds late, you're sending the wrong message. Seriously. Being fashionably late only works when you're larger than life.

2. Dress with intention.

I won't dictate a dress code for an art and style audience. My guidance is to present yourself in a way that makes you feel confident while ensuring reasonable others feel comfortable. Your appearance isn't going to make the deal, but it could break it. Know yourself, know your audience, know the stakes.

3. Maintain respectful boundaries

The crux of 'being professional' in this context is less about stiff rules and restrictions and more about understanding and

respecting boundaries. You can still be the free spirit you are while maintaining a level of professional decorum.

Generally, where I've seen and experienced this one go off the rails is in being too casual or too familiar too soon. This can happen either because you're emotionally destabilized by the environment in a way you didn't anticipate or because you're driven by a desire to be in the good graces of the person you're connecting with.

This is understandable, but the way to get there is not by skipping boundaries. Let things evolve naturally.

Mistakes to Avoid:

- Being late: I can't stress enough that 'being on time' this is binary with no exceptions. You either were or you weren't.
- Being too familiar too soon (ex: oversharing).
- Conflating being casual with being authentic—you can be your true self while maintaining healthy boundaries that help you feel professional.

Connect the Dots

Main Point:

Orient and frame your interaction by recalling the relevant connections and context.

Why It Matters:

People don't remember you, the context, mutual connections, or previous conversations—and they aren't going to admit this. Recalling the context for them allows them to save face and sets the stage for a productive conversation.

What to Know:

To get on somebody's radar, you want to move down the spectrum from “total rando” to “basically family.” You do this by reminding people who you are, highlighting any relevant connections, and setting the context for your interaction.

If you've met briefly before, assume they don't remember and re-connect the dots for them. If it becomes clear they don't remember, it's important not to dwell on it or make them feel bad—move through it with grace while allowing them to save face. At this stage the goal is less about making a new friend and more about orienting them so they drop their guard and can have a productive conversation.

In Practice:

1. Orient yourself in *their world*.
 - Who are you in relation *to them*?
 - Who you are in relation to people they know?
 - Where have you engaged with them before?
 - *Note: This isn't about name dropping for status, this is about providing context.*

2. Share how you've engaged with what they already do?
 - Expression genuine appreciation for an aspect you enjoy.
 - Pro Tip: No need to lay it on thick, be genuine and show appreciation.

3. Keep it short.
 - In writing, this should be 1-2 sentences, absolute max. No exceptions.
 - In person, this should be very brief as well.

Mistakes to Avoid:

- Not allowing them to save face if they don't remember.
- Not considering their context in advance.
- Skipping context and assuming they remember previous interactions.
- Making them ask for context.
- Using industry jargon unless you're 100% sure it will be understood.
- Providing too much background context.

Be Concise

Main Point:

Get to the point.

Why It Matters:

Clear, concise communication shows you respect their time, and that you are competent and capable. At this stage, people often won't tell you when you're being unclear — they'll just disappear.

What to Know:

Keep it simple. Complexity creates confusion, and confusion leads to inaction or delays. Your ability to communicate clearly and succinctly is a preview of what it will be like to work with you. If your point is unclear, people will either not engage or vanish—and they probably won't tell you why. This applies to both written and verbal communication.

In Practice:

- Take time to practice your communication.
 - Always lead with the important stuff.
 - In writing, format it so it looks and feels approachable
- 2. Eliminate friction
 - Avoid jargon and slang unless you're certain it's in their lexicon.
 - Don't provide more context than needed.

3. Proofread and edit

- Use proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
- Read it back before sending – is the main point clear?

Pro Tips:

- The ability to simplify is a skill. It will be hard at first but gets easier over time—and it's crucial.
- I've often found that if I'm struggling to be concise, I don't yet fully understand either my goal or the audience. If you're stuck here, pause and get clear.
- Use an AI assistant to help simplify your message while retaining your point and voice. This will help you understand how to be succinct.

Clearly State Your Goal

Main Point:

What do you want? Why? Make it crystal clear.

Why It Matters:

When a person understands your goal and the reason behind it, it helps them drop their guard and think of solutions you may not have considered.

What to Know:

Your outreach should have one clear goal. Nobody would be halfway through your note and wondering what you want.

Whatever you're seeking, just be up front and clear about it.

Don't assume this is obvious to others based on your title or previous work. It's also important not to bury this under too much context. Even the most leaned in, well-meaning people can't help if they're unclear about what you're asking for.

In Practice:

- Think about this in advance—what do I want?
- Be able to articulate it in one sentence.
- Make sure it's crystal clear to the receiver.

For Example:

- *The reason I'm reaching out is..*
- *I'm reaching out because..*
- *The reason I'm calling is..*

Mistakes to Avoid:

- Sharing multiple goals at once.
- Burying your request/ask in too much context.
- Beating around the bush or being vague to seem flexible.
- Assuming your goals and motivation are clear based on your title, company, etc.

“I wish everyone could tell me exactly what they need from me / The first second they speak to me”

- Drake

- Clearly State Your Goal -

Share the Benefit to Them

Main Point:

What's in it for the other person? Tell them.

Why It Matters:

People want to know what's in it for them. This could be as simple as the satisfaction of helping another human. Whatever it is, make it a clear and attractive proposition that's easy to say yes to.

What to Know:

Outreach often fails because the sender either hasn't thought of the benefit in terms of the other person's interest, or hasn't spelled it out in a clear and compelling way.

In relationship-building and collaboration scenarios, sometimes the benefit is simply the opportunity to help someone—but you still need to make that value clear and easy to grasp. I always say, “Most people want to help, but they don't want to do your work.”

I should acknowledge that understanding needs, decision-making processes, and building value is a deeper sales skill worth learning. I won't dive too deep into that here, but know that this in itself is an art form.

In Practice:

- Think about your request from their perspective.
- Share the benefits in terms that are attractive to them.
- Notice if they've ever done something like this before—why or why not? This can be a great way to open conversations.

Mistakes to Avoid:

- Assuming the benefit to them is clear.
- Focusing on the benefits to you.
- Making misleading claims.
- Thinking benefits are only monetary.

“With the exception of one, the world
is made up of other people”

- John Maxwell

- *Share the Benefit to Them* -

Have a Clear Next Step

Main Point:

Have a simple and attractive next step they can easily act on now.

Why It Matters:

Nothing moves itself along, and they aren't going to do the work for you. Even interested people won't advance things if the next step isn't clear, simple, and easy.

What to Know:

Many great ideas and initiatives die due to the friction between idea and action. Be ready to redirect the excitement from your proposal into immediate action to create momentum. If there's too much time between steps, circumstances can change, giving people reasons to back out.

The trick is to think about the next step in advance of the interaction or meeting, then make it as easy and attractive as possible to take action.

This might include masking the complexity of logistics by handling them yourself. Anticipate the next problem they might encounter and proactively solve it. Remove any friction for them to do your thing, even if it means you take on the headache privately. Make it easy *for them*.

- Have a Clear Next Step -

All-Pro Tip:

If the next step is a meeting, avoid using Calendly or scheduling software at this stage. While it might seem efficient, it can inadvertently signal that you're prioritizing your convenience over theirs.

This has less to do with friction and more with the power dynamic. People you're trying to woo should feel important. Make their experience with *your thing* feel white glove.

Only after you've proven yourself competent, capable, and reliable should you consider shifting to scheduling software, if you feel so inclined. I'm willing to die on this hill.

“Tell me what you want from meeeeeee”

- Devonté Hynes

- *Have a Clear Next Step* -

In Practice:

1. Mask complexity and handle all logistics.

- This doesn't mean misleading about the lift—it means owning the lift yourself to remove obstacles for the other person.

2. If scheduling, propose specific times.

- Not Ideal: “Ok great. I’m free anytime Thursday between 10am–4pm.” ← Too vague, too much friction, and gives them work.
- Good: “Great. Do any of these times work? [Provide 3 specific times, including time zone.] If not, I can be flexible on X date between [specific range].” ← Better. This gives their mind something specific to search for on their calendar. This is a subtle but monster nuance.
- A good rule of thumb: Scheduling should be able to be completed in one email after reaching agreement. If it takes more, find ways to make it more efficient. Exceptions: Big teams, execs with admins teams, etc.

3. Set boundaries on time.

- If you ask for 20 minutes, be prepared to get everything done in 20 minutes. Great meetings can expand, but don't assume or secretly angle for more. Keep your word.

- Have a Clear Next Step -

Hall of Fame Tip:

The crux of this is: DO NOT create unnecessary work for the other person. This includes: mental friction (being vague), emotional friction (power shifts), and physical friction (a hassle to execute on). Make doing your thing the easiest thing they will do all day.

“My name is Sosa you can call me Sammy”

- Chief Keef

- *Have a Clear Next Step* -

Remove Obligation

Main Point:

Lower the stakes for them without misleading about your intent or goals.

Why It Matters:

The reason people ghost is often because the pressure outweighs the relationship capital. When this happens, people ghost or slow-walk actions to create barriers or outs for themselves. Your ability to recognize this and reduce obligation while maintaining clear intent will bring people back to the table.

What to Know:

People don't like to feel boxed in or pressured. If you unintentionally make them feel obligated, they'll either disengage, ghost, or keep their guard up, which will limit productivity.

The trick is to lower the stakes (i.e., remove obligation) without misleading about your intentions. This can be done overtly or subtly, but only after you sense the stakes might be too high. Otherwise, it may undermine your confidence.

All-Pro Tip:

In initial cold outreach, I recommend subtly removing obligation rather than doing so overtly. Use language that implies flexibility and choice to reduce psychological resistance while maintaining professional momentum.

Addressing this directly too early can undermine your confidence or introduce concerns that weren't there in the first place.

In Practice:

1. Frame conversations as explorations.
 - “I’d love to understand if this would make sense for you.”
 - “I’m curious about your thoughts on...”
 - Pro-Tip: Use questions that invite perspective and insight.

2. Build in natural exits and outs (if needed).
 - Acknowledge their position and perspective.
 - Provide options and alternatives.
 - Note: Don’t offer outs unnecessarily, but if you feel that pushing harder is counterproductive and risks burning bridges long term, ease up.

3. Lower the temperature with language.
 - Replace “need to” with “would love to.”
 - Switch “must have” to “would be valuable.”
 - Change “should” to “could.”

Mistakes to Avoid:

- Giving outs and exits unnecessarily
- Reducing pressure so much your intent becomes unclear
- Being so casual that you undermine credibility and confidence

Be Easy to Work With

Main Point:

Make working with you a great experience the whole way.

Why It Matters:

Even if you execute the first nine points perfectly, being hard to work with will prevent repeat business or referrals.

What to Know:

When you make the ask, you own everything that follows. Every logistic, every detail, and every potential friction point becomes your responsibility to handle.

The goal is to be so easy to work with that people actively want to help you again. The most successful people often have gatekeepers, but these strategies work at every level—and you'll be amazed at the doors that open when you're known as someone who makes things easy.

All-Pro Tip:

For in-person meetings, arrive early, secure a good seat, and, if warranted, quietly leave your credit card with the staff to handle the bill without fuss. Remove even the smallest moments of friction or awkwardness.

One caveat: There are corporate and political rules around gifts and lavishness that may apply. I'll assume those scenarios aren't necessary here, but just know gifts can create obligation—see point #9.

In Practice:

1. Take responsibility for all aspects of the meeting
 - This includes: location, agenda, energy, cost.
 - For calls, clearly state who is calling: “I’ll call you at [number].”
 - For meetings, you suggest the location and timing, and work around their schedule.
 - For energy, own the energy of the meeting (see point #2).
 - For next steps, you suggest them and take ownership of driving things forward.

2. Remove the burden of decisions.
 - Make clear recommendations and/or present options.
 - Handle all logistics, including reservations, booking, and coordination.
 - Don’t bother them with unnecessary minutiae.

3. Anticipate needs.
 - Send calendar invites with context.
 - Arrive early to handle setup.
 - Follow up with clear next steps.

Mistakes to Avoid:

- Asking for preferences on minor details.
- Making them coordinate with others.
- Creating unnecessary decision points.
- Expecting them to follow up.
- Leaving open loops.

Final Thoughts

There you have it.

I hope these principles give you the confidence to reach out to that person on your list—whether it's a dream collaborator, future partner, or potential client. Just like I learned from working with some of the best, I hope you'll take these insights and make them your own.

The beauty of these principles is that they're both structured enough to follow and flexible enough to adapt to your unique style and situation. They're not rigid rules but guideposts for more effective human connection, rooted in the psychology we explored throughout this book.

While these tips have worked well for me, the real magic comes from applying them and learning through your own experience. Each connection you make will teach you something new about yourself and others. If you find better approaches or have stories of what's worked for you, I'd love to hear them—I'm always learning too.

Remember that connection is indeed a contact sport—it requires getting off the sidelines and into the game. You'll make mistakes (we all do), but with each attempt, you'll refine your approach and build confidence. The principles in this book are your playbook, but your unique skills and personality are what will ultimately

- *Final Thoughts* -

make your connections meaningful and productive.

If you found value in this book, I'd appreciate a review at the QR code below. If you'd like to receive my weekly newsletter with more insights on creative connection and collaboration, head to stephdiedrich.com. That's where you can find the latest with me as well as ways we could work together.

- *Final Thoughts* -

Imagine knowing you could initiate any opportunity—a dream collaboration, brand deal, or potential client call—with the confidence to be yourself and trust that it would go right.

In Contact Sports, you will learn psychological insights and practical skills that turn strangers into collaborators, clients, and champions of your vision.

Whether you're an introverted artist, a fearless extrovert, or a seasoned professional looking to pivot to a new industry, these 10 principles will help you:

- Reach out to dream collaborators and clients without second-guessing yourself
- Turn cold outreach into meaningful and productive conversations
- Create opportunities that expand your contacts and mind
- Navigate the business side of creativity while staying true to your who you are

You'll discover the subtle nuances (that nobody told you) that result in people vanishing and deals dropping, and the small adjustments that make all the difference and make things go right.

This is NOT a stiff-necked smarmy networking guide or a bros guide to cold calling. These are practical insights and tips you can use today that will give you confidence in making contact with strangers while being your full self and all you can be.

The truth is, most people actually want to help—they just don't want to do your work.