

Demystifying the LinkedIn Invitation: How to Increase Your Chances of a Favorable Response and Start the Relationship Off on the Right Foot

By Liz Lynch

Quite often I get LinkedIn invitations from people I don't know personally and I used to be very stingy with my acceptances.

Everyone uses LinkedIn in different ways, and I like how there are no hard and fast rules about that (even though LinkedIn does advise that you connect only with people you know).

My philosophy a few years ago was that I wanted to link only with people I could recommend without hesitation if one of my contacts needed a referral. For me, that meant that I should know the individual personally and be able to vouch for their work.

At the very least, I should be able to pick them out of a line up.

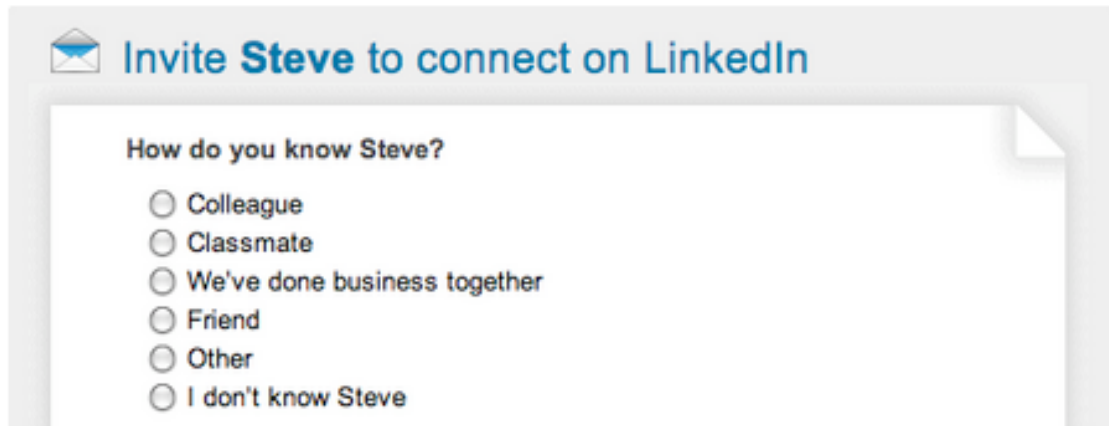
So when complete strangers would invite me to link with them, especially if they didn't include some kind of personal note introducing themselves (a big no-no), I would typically ignore the invitation.

Since [Smart Networking](#) was published two years ago, though, I've softened my stance. Because the book is international and I've been regularly interviewed in the media and spoken for audiences all around the world, more people know about me and seek me out. So **I've been more open to forging new connections through LinkedIn, rather than just reconnecting with those I already know.**

But then a **sticky situation** arises. Before you can send the invitation, **you must indicate how you know the person.**

Let's say you'd like to connect with Steve, someone you met at a networking event and would like to stay in touch with online. As part of the invitation process, LinkedIn asks you to indicate how you know Steve.

Here are your choices:



Invite Steve to connect on LinkedIn

How do you know Steve?

- ☐ Colleague
- ☐ Classmate
- ☐ We've done business together
- ☐ Friend
- ☐ Other
- ☐ I don't know Steve

So now what do you do?

If you choose "**Colleague**" LinkedIn will ask you to indicate at which company in your profile you and Steve worked together. Hm, this doesn't apply...

If you choose "**Classmate**" LinkedIn will ask you to indicate which school in your profile you attended with Steve. Getting colder...

If you choose "**We've done business together**" LinkedIn will ask you to indicate which company in your profile you were working at when you did business with Steve. A bit presumptuous, aren't we?...

You could choose "**Friend**" and LinkedIn won't ask you for any additional information, so this seems like the easiest solution, but is it the best one? Does this devalue your real friendships on LinkedIn?

Personally, I would choose "**Other**" since there is no specific option for "Acquaintance" and really, at the end of the day, by process of elimination, it's the most accurate. If you do choose "Other" however, LinkedIn will ask you to type in Steve's email address, but you should have this anyway if you exchanged business cards at the event.

One of my contacts prefers "friend" over "colleague" because "Every time someone uses the colleague approach," she says, "I always make sure they don't think I'm someone else." Good point. Because you have to indicate which company you worked at together, it can be confusing.

For an employee at a company (and for LinkedIn terminology), "colleague" means "co-worker," but for me as an entrepreneur who partners with and gets help from other entrepreneurs on different projects all the time, "colleague" means "collaborator."

So it doesn't bother me to be categorized as a "colleague" though if we haven't done any work together yet, then "other" is still the most appropriate choice in my book.

A poll I took on my blog last year showed an overwhelming preference (73%) for the "other" category. Do what feels right to you, because what's more important is what you actually say in your LinkedIn invitation...

We all know that when we meet someone at a networking event, we want to put our best foot forward and make a favorable first impression.

That's why we get self-conscious if we feel our palms are a bit sweaty or there might be a poppy seed stuck between our teeth. We know to give a friendly smile and a firm but not crushing handshake. We know not to invade the person's private space by standing too close. And we know to communicate standard pleasantries like, "Hello" and "Nice to meet you."

Yet when it comes to networking online, so much of that awareness of how you might be coming across goes out the window.

How you introduce yourself for the first time to someone who doesn't know you sets the stage for the relationship. Not that their impression can't be changed, but that takes more work than doing things right the first time.

When you invite someone to connect with you on LinkedIn, you have the option of including a personal note with your invitation. Unfortunately LinkedIn pre-populates this field with a rather sterile introduction:

Include a personal note: (optional)

I'd like to add you to my professional network on LinkedIn.

- Joe Smith

There's no warmth, no personality, no indication that even a modicum of time or thought was invested. It looks like you were in a hurry, lazy or clueless, none of which is particularly appealing to people you want to do business with. Your invitation may still be accepted, but **simply adding another connection to your LinkedIn profile really isn't the point.**

The point is to develop relationships. And a stamped out, cookie cutter, impersonal invitation like the one above is not a good way to start.

The sad thing is that it doesn't take a lot of extra time or thought to stand out in a positive way. **There are only five things you need to do.** Not a hundred, just five, so there's absolutely no excuse:

1. **Say hello.** You would do it in person, so why not do it here? Add two words to the beginning of the note such as "Hi Liz" or "Dear Liz." This makes me feel like you're addressing the note specifically to me.
2. **Add context.** Your first sentence should be a brief explanation of why you want to connect. Something along the lines of "I saw you speak at last week's event" or "I read your book" or "I see that we both know Marvin Jones." Even "I saw your name pop up when I was logged in" is better than nothing.
3. **Introduce yourself.** Describe what you do in your next sentence. **DO NOT** say, "Read my profile to learn what I do." That's just rude. If you're the one making the initial contact, it's **YOUR** job to give them the basic information. "I'm a systems engineer at Boeing" or "I'm a blogger and executive coach in San Diego." Let people know who you are, and if they want to find out more, your profile is just a click away.
4. **Invite them to connect.** I don't have a big problem with the default sentence "I'd like to add you to my professional network on LinkedIn" IF the other four steps of this formula are followed. But while you're personalizing things, why not personalize this sentence as well? One of

my favorite ways is to say, "I'd love to connect with you on LinkedIn and see how we can help each other." Think about what would make it appealing for someone to accept your invitation.

5. **Add a closing sign off.** Before your name, add a closing like "Best regards" or "Sincerely" or "Take care." Something that you would include in any other note to a stranger whom you are trying to impress.

So what's the benefit of taking the 10 extra seconds to do this, rather than leaving the default message as is?

First of all, **you've stood out** among all the other LinkedIn invitations your contact may have received that day or that week or that month, so you're going to be remembered.

Second, you've left the impression that you're friendly, polite and **willing to go the extra mile**.

And third, you've established that you're interested in building a relationship rather than just increasing your number of connections. In other words, you're about **quality rather than quantity**.

For a few extra seconds of your time, I'd say that's a **big return for your investment**, wouldn't you?

About Liz Lynch



As founder of the Center for Networking Excellence, and a top business strategist, coach and speaker, Liz Lynch has taught tens of thousands of professionals and entrepreneurs worldwide how to get 24/7 networking results WITHOUT the 24/7 effort. She's the author of *Smart Networking: Attract a Following In Person and Online* and has appeared on CNN, ABC News, Fox Business News, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, CNBC.com, Forbes.com and Businessweek.com. Liz holds an engineering degree from UC Berkeley and an MBA from Stanford University. To download your FREE Smart Networking toolkit, visit <http://www.SmartNetworking.com>.